Marcel Ray Duriez

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Book: 25

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SCHOOL HAS OFFICIALLY BEGUN AN found its rhythm. The first couple of days of school are always throwaway days of handing out books and syllabuses and figuring out where you are sitting and who you are sitting with. Now is when school begins.

For the gym, Coach White set us loose outside to enjoy the warm sun while we still have it. Chris and I are walking the track field. Chris is telling me about a party she went to over

Labor Day weekend. ‘I almost got into a fight with this girl who kept saying I was wearing extensions.

It’s not my fault my hair is fabulous.’ As we around the corner for our third lap; I catch Marcel Kavinsky looking at me. I thought I was imagining it at first; him staring in my direction, but this is the third time.

He is playing ultimate Frisbee with some of the guys. When we pass them; Marcel jogs over to us and says, ‘Can I talk to you for a minute?’

Chris and I look at each other. ‘Her or me?’ she asks.

‘Lara Jean.’

Chris puts her arm around my shoulder protectively. ‘Go ahead. We’re listening.’

Marcel rolls his eyes. ‘I want to talk to her in private.’

‘Fine;’ she snaps, and she flounces away. Over her shoulder, she looks back at me with wide eyes; like What? I shrug back like I have no idea!

In a low; quiet voice; Marcel says, ‘Just so you know; I don’t have any STDs.’

What? I stare at him, my mouth open. ‘I never said you had an STD!’

His voice is still low but furious. ‘I also don’t always take the last piece of pizza.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘That’s what you said. In your letter. How I am an egotistical guy who goes around giving girls STDs. Remember?’

‘What letter? I never wrote you any letter!’

Wait- Yes; I did. I did write him a letter; about a million years ago. But that is not the letter he is talking about. It could not be.

‘Yes. You. Did. It was addressed to me; from you.’

Oh; God. No. No. This is not happening. This is not reality. I am dreaming. I am in my room, and I am dreaming, and Marcel Kavinsky is in

my dream, glaring at me. I close my eyes. Am I dreaming? Is this real?

‘Lara Jean?’

I open my eyes. I am not dreaming, and this is real. This is a nightmare.

Marcel Kavinsky is holding my letter in his hand. It is my handwriting; my envelope; my everything. ‘How- how did you get that?’

‘It came in the mail yesterday.’ Marcel sighs. Gruffly he says, ‘Listen;

it’s no big deal; I just hope you’re not going around telling people…’

‘It came in the mail. To your house?’

‘Yeah.’

I feel faint. I feel faint. Please let me faint right now; because if I faint, I will no longer be here; at this moment. It will be like in movies when a girl passes out from the horror of it all and the fighting happens while she is asleep, and she wakes up in a

hospital bed with a bruise or two, but she is missed all the serious stuff.

I wish that were my; life instead of this. I can feel myself start to sweat. Rapidly I say, ‘You should know that I wrote that letter a really long time ago.’

‘Okay.’

‘Like; years ago, years and years ago… I don’t even remember what I said.’

Up close; your face was not so much handsome as beautiful.

‘Seriously; that letters from middle school. I do not even know who would have sent it. Can I see it?’ I reach for the letter; trying to stay calm and not sound desperate. Just casual cool.

He hesitates and then grins his perfect Marcel grin. ‘Nah; I want to keep it. I never got a letter like this before.’ I leap forward, and quick like a cat I snatch it out of his hand. Marcel laughs and throws up his hands in surrender. ‘All right; fine; have it. Geez.’

‘Thanks.’ I start to back away from him. The paper is shaking my hand.

‘Wait.’ He hesitates. ‘Listen; I didn’t mean to steal your first kiss or whatever. I mean; that wasn’t my intention…’

I laugh a forced and fake laugh that sounds crazy even to my ears.

People turn around and look at us. ‘Apology accepted! Ancient history!’ And then I bolt. I run faster than I have ever run. To the girls’ locker room.

How did this even happen?

I sink to the floor. I have had the going-to-school-naked dream before. I have had the going-to-school-naked-forgot-to-study-for-an-exam-in-a-class-I-never-signed-up-for combo; the naked-exam-somebody-trying-to-kill-me combo. This is all that times infinity.

And then; because there is nothing left for me to do; I take the letter out of the envelope, and I read it.

Dear Marcel.

First, I refuse to call you Kavinsky. You think you are so cool, going by your last name suddenly. Just so you know; Kavinsky sounds like the name of an old man with a long white beard.

Did you know that when you kissed me; I would come to love you? Sometimes I think yes.

Yes. You know why? Because you think EVERYONE loves you, Marcel. That is what I hate about you.

Because everyone does love you. Including me. I did. Not anymore.

Here are all your worst qualities- You burp, and you do not say excuse me. You just assume everyone else will find it charming. And if they don’t; who cares; right? Wrong! You do care. You care a lot about what people think of you. You always take the last piece of pizza. You never ask if anyone else wants it. That is rude. You are so good at everything.

Too good. You could have given other guys a chance to be good, but you never did. You kissed me for no reason. Even though I knew you liked Gen, and you knew you liked Gen, and Gen knew you liked Gen. But you still did it. Just because you could.

I want to know- Why would you do that to me? My first kiss was supposed to be something special. I have read about it; what it is supposed to feel like- fireworks and lightning bolts and the sound of waves crashing in your ears. I did not have any of that.

Thanks to you it was as un-special as a kiss could be.

The worst part of it is that stupid nothing kiss is what made me start liking you. I never did before. I never even thought about you before. Gen has always said that you are the best-looking boy in our grade, and I agreed; because sure, you are. But I still did not see the allure of you.

Plenty of people are good-looking. That does not make them interesting, intriguing, or cool.

That is why you kissed me. To do mind control on me; to make me see you that way. It worked. Your little trick worked. From then on, I saw you. Up close; your face was not so much handsome as beautiful. How many beautiful boys have you ever seen? For me, it was just one.

You. It is a lot to do with your lashes. You have long lashes. Unfairly long.

Even though you do not deserve it; fine; I will go into all the

things I liked about you- One time in science; nobody wanted to be partners with Jeffrey Suttleman because he has BO, and you volunteered like it was no big deal. Suddenly everybody thought Jeffrey was not so bad.

You are still in the chorus; even though all the other boys take band and orchestra now. You even sing solos. And you dance, and you are not embarrassed.

You were the last boy to get tall. And now you are the tallest, but it

is like you earned it. Also, when you were short; no one even cared that you were short- the girls still liked you and the boys still picked you first for basketball in the gym.

After you kissed me; I liked you for the rest of seventh grade and most of eighth. It has not been easy; watching you with Gen; holding hands and making out at the bus loop.

You make her feel incredibly special. Because that is your talent;

right? You are good at making people feel special.

Do you know what it is like to like someone so much you cannot stand it and know that they will never feel the same way? Not. People like you do not have to suffer through those. It was easier after Gen moved and we stopped being friends. At least then I did not have to hear about it. And now that the year is over; I know for sure that I am also over you.

I am immune to you now, Marcel. I am proud to say that I am the only girl in this school who has been immunized with the charms of Marcel Kavinsky. All because I had a bad dose of your in seventh grade and most of eighth. Now I never have to worry about catching you again.

What a relief! I bet if I did ever kiss you again; I would catch something, and it would not be love. It would be an STD!

Lara Jean Song: IF I COULD CRAWL INTO a hole and burrow in it comfortably and live out the rest of my days in it; well; then that is what I would do.

Why did I have to bring up that kiss? Why?

I still remember everything about that day at John Ambrose McClaren's house. We were in the basement, and it smelled like mildew and laundry detergent. I was wearing white shorts and an embroidered blue-

and-white halter top I stole out of Margot's closet.

I had on a strapless bra for the first time. It was one of Chris's, and I kept adjusting it because it felt unnatural.

It was one of our first boy-girl hangouts on a weekend and at night. That was a weird thing too because it felt purposeful. Different from going over to Allie's house after school and neighborhood boys are there hanging out with her twin brother.

Also- different from going to the arcade at the mall knowing we would run into boys. This was deciding; getting dropped off; wearing a special bra; all on a Saturday night.

No parents around; just us in John's ultra-private basement. John's older brother was supposed to be watching us, but John paid him ten dollars to stay in his room. Not that anything exciting happened; for instance; an impromptu game of spin the bottle or seven minutes in heaven- two possibilities for which we girls had

prepared for with gum and lip gloss. All that happened was the boys played video games and we girls watched and played on our phones and whispered to each other.

And then people's moms and dads were picking them up, and it was so anticlimactic after all that planning and anticipation. It was disappointing for me; not because I liked anyone; but because I liked romance and drama and I was hoping something exciting would happen to someone. Something did.

To me!

Marcel and I were downstairs alone; the last two people to be picked up. We were sitting on the couch. I kept texting my dad, where are you-u? Marcel was playing a game on his phone. And then; out of nowhere; he said, ‘Your hair smells like coconuts.’

We were not even sitting that close. I said, ‘Really? You can smell it from there?’

He scooted closer and took a sniff, nodding. ‘Yeah; it reminds me of Hawaii or something.’

‘Thanks!’ I spoke. I was not positive it was a compliment, but it seemed like enough of one to say thanks. ‘I’ve been switching between this coconut one and my sister’s baby shampoo; to do an experiment on which makes my hair softer.’

Then Marcel Kavinsky leaned right in and kissed me, and I was stunned.

I had never thought of him any kind of way before that kiss. He was too pretty; too smooth. Not my type of boy at all. But after he kissed me; he was all I could think about for months after. What if Marcel is just the beginning? What if - what if my other letters somehow got sent too? To John Ambrose McClaren. Kenny from camp. Lucas Krapf.

Josh.

Oh my God; Josh.

I leap up from the floor. I must find that hatbox. I must find those letters.

I go back outside to the track. I do not see Chris anywhere; so, she is smoking behind the field house. I go straight over to Coach, who is sitting on the bleachers with his phone.

‘I can’t stop throwing up;’ I whimper. I double over and cradle my arms to my stomach. ‘Can I please go to the nurse’s office?’

Coach barely looks up from his phone. ‘Sure.’

As soon as I am out of his eye line; I make a run for it. The gym’s my last period of the day, and my house is only a couple of miles from school. I run like the wind. I do not think I have ever run so hard or so fast in my life, and I never will again. I run so hard; a couple of times; I must stop because I feel like I am going to throw up.

-And-

Then, I remember the letters and Josh, and Up close; your face was not so much handsome as beautiful, and I am off and running again. As soon as I get home; I dash upstairs and go into my closet for my hatbox. It is not sitting on the top shelf where it usually sits.

It is not on the floor, or behind my stack of board games. It is not anywhere. I get on my hands and knees and start rifling through piles of sweaters; shoe boxes; craft supplies. I look in places it could not be because it

is a hatbox and it is big, but I look anyway. My hatbox is nowhere.

I collapse onto the floor. This is a horror movie. My life has become a horror movie.

Next to me my phone buzzes. It is Josh. Where are you? Did you get a ride home with Chris?

I turn my phone off and go down to the kitchen and call Margot on the house phone.

It is still my first impulse; to go to her when things get bad. I will just

leave out the Josh part of it and focus on the Marcel part. She will know what to do; she always knows what to do.

I am all set to burst out; Gogo; I miss you so much and everything is a mess without you, but when she picks up the phone; she sounds sleepy, and I can tell that I have woken her up.
‘Were you sleeping?’ I ask.

‘No; I was just lying down;’ she lies.

‘Yes; you were sleeping! Gogo: it is not even ten o’clock over there!

Wait; is it? Did I calculate wrong again?'

'No; you're right. I am just so tired. I've been up since five, because-' Her voice trails off. 'What's wrong?'

I hesitate. It is better not to burden Margot with all of this. I mean; she just got to college- this is what she is worked for; this is her dream come true. She should be having fun and not worrying about how things are going back home without her. Besides, what would I even say? I wrote a bunch of

love letters and they got sent out; including one I wrote to your boyfriend? ‘Nothing’s wrong;’ I say. I am doing what Margot would do, which is figure it out on my own.

‘It sounds like something’s wrong.’ Margot yawns. ‘Tell me.’

‘Go back to sleep; Gogo.’

‘Okay;’ she says, yawning again.

We hang up and I make myself an ice cream sundae right in the carton- chocolate sauce; whipped

cream; chopped nuts. The works. I take it back up to my room and eat it lying down. I feed it to myself like medicine; until I have eaten the whole thing; every bite.

A LITTLE WHILE LATER wakes up to Kellie standing at the foot of my bed. ‘You’ve got ice cream on your sheets;’ she informs me.

I groan and turn over to my side. ‘Kellie; that’s the least of my problems today.’

‘Daddy wants to know if you want chicken for dinner or hamburgers. My vote is chicken.’

I sit straight up. Daddy’s home! He knows something. He was on that cleaning binge, throwing things away. He is spirited my hatbox away somewhere safe, and the Marcel letter was just an unfortunate fluke! I jump out of bed and run downstairs, my heart thumping hard in my chest.

My dads in his study; wearing his glasses and reading a thick book on Audubon paintings.

All in one breath I ask; ‘Daddy-have-you-seen-my-hatbox?’

He looks up; his face is hazy, and I can tell he is still with Audubon’s birds and not at all focused on my frenzied state. ‘What box?’

‘My teal hatbox Mommy gave me!’

‘Oh; that-;’ he says, still looking confused. He takes off his glasses. ‘I

don’t know. It might have gone the way of your roller skates.’

‘What does that mean? What are you even saying?’

‘Goodwill… There’s a slight possibility I took them to Goodwill.’

When I gasp; my dad says defensively; ‘Those roller skates don’t even fit you anymore. They were just taking up space!’

I sink to the floor. ‘They were pink, and they were vintage, and I was saving them for Kellie - and that’s not

even the point. I do not care about the roller skates. I care about my hatbox! Daddy: you don't even know what you've done.' My dad gets up and tries to pull me off the floor. I resist him and flop onto my back like a goldfish.

'Lara Jean; I don't even know that I got rid of it. Come on; let us have a look around the house; all right? Don't let us panic yet.'

'There's only one place it could be, and it's not there. It's gone.'

‘Then I’ll check Goodwill tomorrow on my way to work;’ he says, squatting down next to me. He is giving me that look- sympathetic but also exasperated and mystified; like How; is it possible that my sane and reasonable DNA created such a crazy daughter?

‘It’s too late. It is too late. There’s no point.’

‘What was in that box that’s so important?’

I can feel my ice cream sundae curdling in my stomach. For the second

time, today I feel like I am going to be sick. ‘Only everything.’

He grimaces… ‘I didn’t realize your mother had given it to you or that it was so important.’ As he retreats off to the kitchen; he says, ‘Hey; how about an ice cream sundae before dinner? Will; that cheers you up?’

Continued- 2

As if dessert before dinner would be the thing that cheers me up as if I am Kellie’s age and not sixteen going on seventeen. I do not even

bother dignifying it with an answer. I just lie there on the floor, my cheek against the cool hardwood. Besides, there is not any ice cream left anyway, but he will find that out soon enough.

I do not even want to think about Josh reading that letter. I do not even want to think about it.

It is too terrible.

After dinner (chicken; per Kellie’s request); I am in the kitchen doing dishes when I hear the doorbell ring. Daddy opens the door, and I hear

Josh’s voice. ‘Hey; Dr. Covey. Is Lara Jean around?’

Oh; no! No- no-no-no. I cannot see Josh. I know I must at some point; but not today.

Not right this second. I cannot. I just cannot.

I drop the plate back into the sink and make a run for it; out the back door; down the porch steps; across the backyard to the Pearce's’ yard. I scramble up the wooden ladder and into Carolyn Pearce’s old treehouse. I

have not been to this treehouse since middle school. We used to hang out up here sometimes, at night. Chris, Genevieve, Allie, and me; the boys a couple of times.

I peek through the wooden slats; crouched in a ball; waiting until I see Josh walk back to his house. When I am sure he is inside; I climb down the ladder and run back to mine. I sure have been doing a lot of running today. I am exhausted; now that I think of it.

I WAKE UP THE NEXT morning renewed. I am a girl with a plan. I am just going to have to avoid Josh forever. It is as simple as that. And if not forever; then at least until this dies-a down and he forgets about my letter. There is still the tiny chance he never even got it.

Whoever mailed Marcel's only sent the one! You never know.

My mom always said optimism was my best trait. Both Chris and Margot have said it is annoying, but to

that; I say looking on the bright side of life never killed anybody.

When I get downstairs; Daddy and Kellie are already at the table eating toast.

I make myself a bowl of cereal and sit down with them.

‘I’m going to stop by Goodwill on my way to work;’ my dad says, crunching on his toast from behind his newspaper. ‘I’m sure the hatbox will turn up there.’

‘Your hatbox is missing?’ Kellie asks me. ‘The one Mommy gave you?’

I nod and shovel cereal into my mouth. I must leave soon or else I will risk running into Josh on my way out.

‘What was in the box; anyway?’ Kellie asks.

‘That’s private;’ I say. ‘All you need to know is the contents are precious to me.’

‘Will you be mad at Daddy if you never get the hatbox back?’ Kellie

answers her question before I can. ‘I doubt it. You never stay mad for long.’

This is true. I never can stay mad for long.

Peering over his newspaper; he asks Kellie; ‘What in the world was in that hatbox?’

Kellie shrugs. Her mouth full of toast; she says, ‘Probably more French berets?’

‘No; not more berets.’ I give them both a mean look. ‘Now if you’ll

excuse me; I don’t want to be late for school.’

‘Aren’t you leaving a little early?’

‘I’m taking the bus today;’ I say. And every day until Margot’s car is fixed, but they do not need to know that.

THE WAY IT HAPPENS IS a strange sort of serendipity. A slow-motion train wreck…

For something to go this colossally wrong; everything must

intersect and collide at the exact right; or in this case; wrong; moment.

If the bus driver had not had trouble backing out of the cul-de-sac; taking four extra minutes to get to school; I never would have run into Josh.

If Josh's car had started up and he had not had to get a jump from his dad; he would not have been walking by my locker.

And if Marcel had not had to meet Ms. Wooten in the guidance

office; he would not have been walking down the hallway ten seconds later. And this whole thing would not have happened. But it did.

I am at my locker; the door is jammed, and I am trying to yank it open. I finally get the door loose and there's Josh, standing right there.

'Lara Jean -' He has this shell-shocked, confused expression on his face.

'I've been trying to talk to you since last night. I came by, and nobody

could find you…' He holds out my letter. 'I don't understand. What is this?'

'I don't know;' I hear myself say. My voice feels far away. It is like I am floating above myself; watching it all unfold.

'I mean; it's from you; right?'

'Oh; wow.' I take a breath and accept the letter. I fight the urge to tear it up.

'Where did you even get this?'

‘It got sent to me in the mail.’ Josh jams his hands into his pockets. ‘When did you write this?’

‘Like; a long time ago;’ I say. I let out a fake little laugh. ‘I don’t even remember when. It might have been middle school.’ Excellent job; Lara Jean. Keep it up.

Slowly he says, ‘Right - but you mention going to the movies with Margot, Mike, and Ben that time. That was a couple of years ago.’

I bite my bottom lip. ‘Right. I mean; it was kind of a long time ago. In the grand scheme of things.’ I can feel tears coming on so close that if I break concentration even for a second; if I waver; I will cry and that will make everything worse if such a thing is possible. I must be cool, breezy, and nonchalant now. Tears would ruin that.

Josh is staring at me so hard I must look away. ‘So then - Do you - or did you have feelings for me or…?’

‘I mean; yes; sure; I did have a crush on you at one point; before you and Margot ever started dating. A million years ago.’

‘Why didn’t you ever say anything? Because of Lara Jean - God. I don’t know.’ His eyes are on me, and they are confused, but there is something else; too. ‘This is crazy. I feel kind of blindsided.’

The way he is looking at me now; I am suddenly in a time warp back to a summer day when I was fourteen

and he was fifteen, and we were walking home from somewhere.

He was looking at me so intently I was sure he was going to try to kiss me. I got nervous; so, I picked a fight with him, and he never looked at me like that again.

Until this moment.

Do not. Just please, do not.

Whatever he is thinking; whatever he wants to say; I do not want to hear it. I will do anything; anything; not to hear it.

Before he can; I say, ‘I’m dating someone.’

Josh’s jaw goes slack. ‘What?’

What?

‘Yup, I’m dating someone; someone I really- like; so please don’t worry about this.’ I wave the letter like it is just paper; trash; like once, upon a time I did not pour my heart on this page. I stuff it into my bag. ‘I was confused when I wrote this; I don’t even know how it got sent out. Honestly, it is not worth talking about.

CHAPTER ONE

The Bellboys snickered at me. Tom impersonated Noah, making his voice high-pitched. 'Leave off. Don’t talk to my girlfriend- he said all snotty.' 'Yeah- you heard me, off leave- yah-ow, I said in my English way of speaking.' Harry yelped. 'Otherwise, I’ll beat you up with my dollie.' Rallie started toward the Bell house, head downward. Abundant, Noah's beliefs and feelings. As usual, he had made it not as good as-. 'Da- Don’t go yet,' Harper shouted to Rallie, pay no attention to her pain in

the romp brothers. 'Call home and just see if you can spend the night.'

'I better not- not so- do,' Rallie said. 'I've just got to get my knapsack from inside.' 'Ah- hey- what up for me,' Noah said, clutching Jann. He headed for the canopy way door and got there just as it shut in his face. 'You overlooked… no?' Inside of Harper's house was always a mess. Discarded clothes, half-empty cups, and sports apparatus covered most surfaces. Her

parents seemed to have given up on the house around the same time they gave up on trying to administer any rules about dinners and bedtimes and fighting-around Harper is eighth birthday when one of her brothers threw her cake with its still-lit birthday candles at her older sister.

Now there were no more birthday parties. There were not even family meals, just packages of canned ravioli top with macaroni and cheese, and tins of sardines in the pantry so-o, that the kids could feed themselves

long before their mother and father would come home from work and fell, exhausted, into their bed. They were old-bought from Salvation army-with big shiny heads, different-colored tails, and frizzy hair. HARPER SET DOWN ONE OF THE MERMAID DOLLIES CLOSE to the stretch of asphalt road, that represented the Murkiest Sea. They would crash the ship against the shallows if they could, lure the crew into the sea, and eat the pirates with their jagged teeth.

Their silly plastic smiles, hiding their lethal intentions Noah- Ethan could almost imagine- their flippers lashing back, and forth as they waited for the boat to get closer. Noah rummaged through his bag of action figures. He pulled out the pirate with the two cutlasses and placed him gently at the center of the boat-shaped paper they had considered down with the passageway of the shingle. Without gravel, the Neptune’s Pearl was likely to blow away in the early autumn wind. He could almost believe he was not on

the scrubby pasture in front of Harper’s ramshackle house with the sagging siding, but aboard a real ship, with salt spray stinging his face, on his, way to the voyage. Noah had an unusual way of speaking for each of his figures. He was not sure that anyone but him could tell his voices apart, but he felt different when he talked to them.

'We’re going to have to lash ourselves to the mast,' Noah said, as Tommy sings the Blade, captain of the Neptune’s Pearl. 'You think Jon’s guards will be waiting for us in Blue

falls?' Rallie made Girl Jann ask. She was loud and wild, almost nothing like Rallie, who chafed under the thumb of her overprotective grandmother, but did it quietly.

Rallies braids spilled in front of her amber eyes as she moved a hand covered wood doll- Jann figures closer to the center of the boat. Girl Jann was a thief who had begun traveling with Tommy sings the Blade after she had been unsuccessful in picking his pocket. It was something he never wanted to give up. He would go on

playing like this constantly, no matter how old they got, although he did not see how that was possible.

It was already hard sometimes. That was why Noah loved playing: those moments where it seemed like he was retrieving some other world, one that felt real as anything. 'He might catch us,' said Noah, grinning at her. 'But he'll never hold us. Nothing will. We're on a mission for the Great Princess and we won't be stopped.' He had not expected to say those words until they came out of his mouth, but

they felt right. They felt like Tommesings’s true thoughts.

CHAPTER TWO

'You can knot ropes to keep you safe, but no boat can pass through these waters unless a sacrifice is given to the deep,' Harper made one of the mermaids say. 'Freely or reluctantly. If one of your crew does not spring into the sea, the sea will pick her sacrifice. That’s the mermaid’s jinx.' It was said… Harper tucked windblown strands of

red hair behind her ears and regarded Noah and Rallie very seriously.

She was insignificant and violent, with speckles thick enough to remind Noah of the stars at night. She adored nothing better than overseeing the story and had a sense of how to make a moment melodramatic. That was why she was the finest at playing anti-heroes. Rallie and Noah exchanged a look. Were the mermaids telling the truth? Harper was not supposed to make up rules like that-ones that no one else had agreed to-but Noah

objected only when he did not like them. A curse seemed like it could be fun. ‘But just then,’ said Harper ominously, moving one of the mermaids to the edge of the ship, 'webbed fingers grab Girl Jann’s ankle, and the mermaid pulls her over the side of the boat. She’s gone.'

'We’ll all go down together before we lose a single member of this crew,' he fake-shouted in Tommesings’s voice. 'We’re on a mission for the Great Princess, and we fear her curse more than yours.' 'You can’t do that!' Rallie

said. 'I was lashed to the mast.' Rallie groaned, as though Harper was being especially annoying. Which she kind of was. 'Well, Girl Jann was in the middle of the boat. Even if she were not lashed, a mermaid couldn’t get to her without crawling on board.' 'You didn’t specify that you were,' Harper told her. 'Tommesings suggested it, but you didn’t say whether or not you did it.'

'If Jann gets pulled over the side, I’m going after her,' Noah said, plunging Tommesings into the gravel

water. 'I meant it when I said no one gets left behind.'

'I didn’t get pulled over the side,' Rallie insisted.

As they sustained arguing two of Harper’s brothers walked out of the house, letting the screen door slam behind them. They observed over and started to snicker. The older of the two, Tom, pointed directly at Noah and said something under his breath. His younger brother laughed.

Noah felt his expression heat. He did not the reason they knew anyone at his middle school, but still. If any of his colleagues found out that, at twelve, he was still playing with action figures, basketball would become a lot less fun. School might get bad too.

'Close your eyes to them,' Harper declared loudly. 'They’re BUTTS.'

'All we were going to say is that Rallie’s grandma called,' Tom said,

his face a parody of hangdog incorruptibility.

He and Harry had the same tomato-red hair as their sister, but they were not much like her in any other way that Noah might understand.

They, along with their firstborn sister, were always in trouble-fighting, cutting school, smoking, and other stuff.

The Bell kids were considered hoodlums in town and, Harper aside,

they seemed intent on doing what they could to uphold that character.

'Old magnates says that you need to be home before shadowy, and for us to be sure to tell you not to forget or make excuses.

She seems rough, Rallie.' The words were supposed to be nice, but you could tell from the sickly-sweet way Tom talked that he was not being nice at all.

Rallie stood up and fleecy off her skirt. The orange glow of the

setting sun-bronzed her skin and turned her glossy box braids metallic.

Her eyes narrowed some. Her appearance wavered between confused and angry.

Boys had been harassing her ever since she had hit ten, gotten bends, and started looking a lot older than she was.

Noah hated the way Tom talked to her like he was making fun of her without really saying anything bad,

but he never knew what to say to stop it either.

'Leave off,' Noah told them.

Noah felt envious every time he thought of that kind of self-determination, and Rallie loved it even more than he did. She spent as many nights there as her grandmother permissible. Harper’s parents did not seem to notice, which worked out flawlessly.

He undone and pushed open the screen door and went inside.

Rallie was standing in front of the dusty, old, locked display cabinet in the corner of the Bell living room, peering in at all the things Harper's mother had forbidden Harper, on pain of death and dismemberment, from touching.

That was where the dollie they called the Great Princess of all their realms was surrounded, next to a blown-glass vase from Savers that had turned out to be vintage something-or-other. The Princess had been picked up by Harper's mother at a tag sale, and

she insisted that one day she was going to go on Antiques Live broadcast, sell it, and move them all to Sam.

The Princess was a bone China dollie of a child with straw-gold curls and paper-white skin- and the soul of a young girl within. Her eyes were closed, lashes a fair-haired fringe against her cheek. She wore a long gown, the thin fabric dotted with something dark that might be a fungus. Noah could not remember when exactly they had decided that she was the Great Princess, only that they would all

felt like she was inspecting them, even though her eyes were closed, and that Harper’s sister had been terrified of her.

One time, Harper had woken in the middle of the night and found her sister with whom she shared a room-sitting upright in bed. 'If she gets out of the case, she’ll come for us,' her sister had said, unqualified faced, before slumping back down on her pillow. No amount of calling to the other side of the room had seemed to stir her. Harper had tossed and turned, unable

to sleep for the rest of the night. But in the morning, her sister had told her that she did not recollect saying whatsoever, that it must have been a terrifying dream, and that their mother needed to get rid of that dollie. I felt like I could not sleep with that dollie looking right through me as if she were alive and wanting me in some creepy way- she was feeling me… and I was feeling uncommentable… by it all. Subsequently, that, to escape being entirely frightened, Noah, Harper, and Rallie had added the dollie to their

game of play. Conferring to the legend they had created, the Princess ruled over the whole enchilada from her beautiful glass tower high up. She influenced to put her mark on anyone who refuses to comply with her guidelines. When that occurred, nothing would go right for them until they regained her kindness. They would be convicted of crimes they did not commit. Their friends and family would sicken and decease. Ships would sink, and squalls would strike.

The one thing the Princess could not do, though, was an escape. 'Are- you, all right?' Noah asked Rallie. She seemed fascinated by the case, staring into it as though she could see approximately- Noah could not. Lastly, Rallie turned around, her eyes shining. 'My grandmother wants to know where I am every second. She wants to pick out my clothes for me and grumbles about my braids all the time. I just am so-o over it. Besides yours truly do not know if she is going to let me be in the play this year, even though yours truly

got a good part- but…? Uh? She cannot see so well after twilight, and she does not want to drive me home. I’m just so tired of all her rules, as well as it’s like the older I get, the poorer she gets.'

Noah had heard most of that before, but usually, Rallie just sounded resigned to it. 'What about your aunt? Could you ask her to pick you up after rehearsals?'

Rallie snorted. 'She’s never forgiven Aunt Linda for trying to get custody of me way back when. Brings it

up at every holiday. It’s made her super paranoid.'

Mrs. Mag Harry grew up in the Philippines and was fond of telling anyone who would listen to how different things were over there. According to her, Filipino teenagers worked hard, never talked back, and did not draw on their hands with ink pens or want to be actors, like Rallie did. They did not get as tall as Rallie was getting either.

Rallie laughed. 'Yes, okay. Made her extra-super paranoid.'

'Made her super paranoid?' Noah asked. 'Hey.' Harper came into the living room from outside, holding the rest of their figures. 'Are you sure you can’t stay over, Rallie?' Rallie shook her head, plucked Girl Jann out of Noah’s hand, and went down the hallway to Harper’s room. 'I was just getting my stuff.'

'Her grandmother,' he said, with a shrug. 'You know.' Harper

turned impatiently to Noah for an explanation. She never liked it when she was not part of a conversation and hated the idea that her friends had kept any secrets from her, even stupid ones. 'Otherwise, maybe she'll just make him do another quest.' He thought about it a moment and grinned. 'Maybe she wants him to get skilled adequate with a blade to break her out of that cabinet.'

Harper exhaled and beheld at the cabinet. After a moment, she spoke. 'If you finish this quest, the Princess

will probably lift the curse on Tommesings. He could go home and finally solve the mystery of where he came from.' They walked down the hall to Harper’s room just as Rallie came out, backpack over the left shoulder. 'Don’t even think about it,' Harper alleged, only half-joking.

'Come on.'

'See you tomorrow then,' she said as she slid past them. She did not look happy, but Noah thought she might just be upset that she was

leaving early and that they were going to be hanging out without her. He and Harper did not usually play the game when Rallie was not there. But lately, Rallie seemed to be more bothered by him and Harper spending time alone together, which he did not understand.

An odd and ends of her sister's old Barbies were on top of a bookshelf, waiting for Harper to try to fix their melted arms and chopped hair. The bookshelves were overfull with make-believe paperbacks and overdue library books, some of them on Greek myths,

some on mermaids, and a few on homegrown hauntings. Noah thought about drawing a map of their kingdoms-one with the seas, and the islands and the whole kit and caboodle-and wondered where he could get a gigantic enough piece of paper.

Noah walked into Harper's room and flopped down on her grayish shag rug. Harper used to share the room with her younger sister, and piles of her sister's outgrown clothes still endured spread out in meanings, along with an assemblage of used makeup

and notebooks covered in stickers, plus indecipherable with lyrics.

He ran down the steps, cutting her off in mid- reproach. 'Where’s my carrier- bag? The action figures. The models and early made cars. All of them. They’re not upstairs.'

'Noah?' she called up from down the stairs. 'That’s the second time you’ve banged-'

'Nope, Mom, they’re gone.' Noah looked over at his father and was surprised to see the expression on his

dad’s face-an appearance he was not sure how to understand.

'I didn’t take anything out of your room. I bet it’s underneath one of the element-size piles of laundry up there.' She smiled as she got down a stack of plates, but he did not smile back at me. Why…? 'Clean your room, and I bet the bag turns up.'

She followed Noah’s gaze, turning to Noah’s father, her voice incredibly quiet. 'Evelyn?'

'Where are they?' Noah asked, a hazardous edge to his voice.

'He’s twelve years old, playing with a bunch of crap,' he said; getting up from the sofa, and raising his hands in a pacifying way. 'He’s got to grow up. It was time he got rid of them. He should be absorbed with friends, listening to music, goofing off. Noah, trust me when I say this to you-you won’t miss them.'

'Those figures were mine- I tell yah!' Noah was so angry about this- he

could hardly think about it. His voice shook with anger and frustration. 'They were mine- MINE.'

'Forget it- shit, they’re gone,' his pop said. 'There’s no point in throwing a hissy fit.'

'Somebody’s- like- needs to get you ready for the real world, kid…' said his father, his face flushing red. 'Be mad all you want, but it’s done. Done… Do you comprehend me? It is time you grew up. End of discussion.'

'Evelyn, what were you thinking?' Noah’s mother demanded. 'You can’t just go making decisions without talking-'

'Oh, don’t be so melodramatic,' his dad said.

'Where are they?' Noah snarled at him with a look of hate. He had never talked to his father this way, never talked to an adult this way. 'What did you do with all of the stuff?'

'Evelyn!' His mother’s voice was threatening.

His father stopped for an instant; his expression was suddenly undefined. 'I threw them out… okay- out- I’m sorry about it- but- o-well. I did not think you would be this upset. They’re just plastic-'

'GIVE THEM BACK NOW- NOW!' Noah roared. He was out of the switch, and he did not care about looking like a baby about it.

'In the garbage they are?' Noah ran dashing out the door, and down the old worn steps. Two big, dented metal

garbage cans were at the end of the yard by the driveway, resting on the fence tipped some. He pulled off the lid of one with numb fingers, then threw it against the road with a clang and it rolled down the hill. GO after that- NO!

Please, he thought. Please- please- please.

It felt like a punch to the gut. Tommy sings the Allyson and Jasper, and all the others were dead. Without them, all their stories would be dead

too. He wiped his face against the sleeve of his shirt.

But the inside of the can was unfilled. The trash truck had previously come and gone. Then he twisted back to the house. His father was silhouetted in the entranceway.

'Hey, I’m sorry,' he said.

'Don’t bother trying to be my father any longer,' Noah said, strolling up the front steps and past him. 'It’s too late for that, it was too late- like years ago- it was- so-o.'

'Noah,' his mother said, her hand accomplishment out to touch his shoulder, but he walked past her.

His father just stared at him; his face troubled.

In his room, Noah looked up at the ceiling, trying to noiseless the feelings inside him. He didn’t complete’ his homework. He did not eat dinner, even though his mother carried up a plate of food for him and set it down on his desk- he left it to sit being a brat. He did not change out of his clothes

into his pajamas he just sat three in his undies. He did not cry- he just looked miserable.

She took another sip of coffee… now do stars… 'He called the dump, too. Asked them if there was any way to get your toys back. He even obtainable to drive over there and look for them himself- but there was no way. I am sorry. I know that he did a stupid thing, but he honestly tried to fix it, sweetheart.'

Noah tossed and turned, concentrating on the glooms moving across the ceiling and on the anger that seemed to grow instead of lessening. He was angry. At his father, for destroying the game. At his mother, for letting his father back into their lives. And that anger coagulated inside his belly and crawled up his throat until it felt like it might choke him. Until he was sure that there was no way he could ever tell anyone what had happened without all his anger spilling out and engulfing everything.

At Harper and Rallie, who had not lost anything. And at himself, for acting like a little kid, just like his dad had said, and for caring about Tommy sings the Blade and a bunch of plastic toys as though they were real people.

And the only way not to tell anyone was to end the game.

CHAPTER THREE

THE NEXT MORNING, NOAH PUSHED HIS LIMP CEREAL around in a bowl of milk as his mom poured herself a second cup of coffee. Light

filtered in through the dirty windowpane to make the scarred wood on the kitchen table show the pale watermarks from wet mugs and the greenish smudge where Noah had once drawn a spaceship in permanent marker. He traced the faint outline of it with a finger.

'Your father called the trash company last night,' his mother said.

Noah blinked and looked up at her.

Noah felt weirdly numb, as though everything that happened was on a slight delay. He knew what she was saying was supposed to be important, but somehow, he could not make it matter. He felt tired, too, as though he had not slept at all, even though he had slept so deeply that the ringing of his alarm had seemed to bring him up from the bottom of something deep and dark. He had had to fight through his dreams to wake.

'Okay,' he said because there was nothing else to say.

'Tonight, we’re going to sit down and have a family discussion. Your dad was brought up by an extremely strict man and, as much as he hates it, he acts like his father sometimes. It’s what he knows, honey.'

Noah shrugged and put a scoop of soggy cereal in his mouth to keep from telling her that he would rather be hung upside down by his toes over a blazing fire than talk to his father. Still chewing, he grabbed his backpack and started for school.

'We can discuss later,' his mother said with false cheer, moments before he slammed his way out the door.

But this morning he hurried along the side of the street, glad to be alone. He kept his head down as he stalked along, kicking rocks and chunks of loose asphalt into the road. When he saw the school building in the distance, he wondered what would happen if he just kept going, the same way his father had left them three years ago. If he just kept walking until he came to a new

place where no one knew him, lied about his age, and got a job delivering newspapers or something… The chilly air felt like a slap in the face. He was relieved not to see Harper and Rallie on the sidewalk. They all lived close enough that sometimes they ran into each other on the way to school, and they usually walked home together.

Well, he did not know quite what he would do after that.

If a story idea came to him, he concentrated on something else until it went away.

By the time he made up his mind to go to school, he was late. Mr. Lockwood glowered at him as he slunk into class just after the bell. He sat at his desk and drew nothing in the margins of his notebook.

At lunch, his sandwich tasted like cardboard. He threw out his apple.

After school, he told the coach he was too sick to go to practice, but

really, it was just that he did not want to. He did not much want to do anything.

A few minutes later Rallie caught up with him, the slap of her shoes on the pavement heralding her approach. He felt like an idiot for taking the same old route and not expecting to see any of his friends. He started walking home, thinking he could sit in front of the television until Mom got home from work, then tell her the same thing he told the coach. She was wearing a Jon T-shirt with a

creature on it that was half brontosaurus, half kitten. Her braids were pulled back into a headband, and little feather earrings hung from her ears. 'Noah?' Rallie asked, out of breath from running.

But that seemed forever ago, and so much had happened since. He almost did not feel like the same person.

He had no idea what to say to her. He wanted to ask her about the day before when she was giggling with

her friends-he wanted to know why she had not talked to him.

He was like a random generator of weirdness. 'Hey,' he said. 'Harper wanted me to tell you to walk slow. She’s getting a book from the librarian.'

A kid named Aubrey waved to them, walking in their direction. He had big glasses and was always saying crazy things.

Then one of them would ask, 'Want to play?' like always. And he

would have to say something. 'Oh,' Noah said, feeling doomed. He knew what would happen next. One by one the mass of kids who walked home together would gather and then peel away into clumps headed in different directions until it was just Harper and Rallie and him.

'You, okay?' Rallie asked.

'Yes,' said Aubrey. 'You don’t look so good, Noah. Somebody walk over your grave?'

He blinked a couple of times. At least Aubrey was acting like his normal crazy self. That was one thing that was not going to change. 'What?'

'No,' Noah said. His foot sent a few leaves spiraling up into the air. Talking about graves made him think about walking home the night before when he had thought he heard the wind howling at his heels. He shivered. 'So, my grave is going to be in front of Thomas Peebles Middle School? That’s so-o lame.'

'That’s what my grandpa always said. You never heard that?'

Rallie rolled her eyes. 'It’s a saying. It means somewhere someone is stepping on the place where you’re going to be buried.' 'It doesn’t mean that you’re going to be buried here.'

'So, it could be any old place?' Noah asked, shaking his head. 'How does that help to know?'

'It’s not supposed to help,' Aubrey said. 'It’s just supposed to be true.'

Her hair was in coppery pigtails, and her eyeliner looked smudged on one eye like she had forgotten it was there and rubbed over it. 'What are you guys talking about?' Harper asked, bounding up to them. She had on a black sweater and was bouncing on her Jon Chucks, one of the pink laces untied and dragging muddily behind her.

Harper looked over at Rallie and raised her eyebrows. 'Nothing like nothing or nothing like something?'

'Nothing,' Noah said with a shrug.

He was sure that they used to all speak the same language a year ago. Rallie shook her head and smiled, but then turned her smile down at the pavement like she was embarrassed. Noah had no idea what was going on. He wondered if it had to do with yesterday and the giggling but could not think of how to ask. Sometimes it seemed to him that girls spoke a different language, but he could not figure out when they had learned it.

'We’re talking about superstitions,' said Aubrey. 'Like how stepping where someone’s grave is going to make them shudder involuntarily.'

He always talked with big words, like a textbook. Superstitions. Shudder. Involuntarily. Some kids said it was because his mother was a part-time teacher over at the college, but Noah thought that was just how Aubrey was.

Wait, no, I do remember! Harry pushed me in the backyard, and I whipped a branch at him. The branch got him good, right above the eye. He was bleeding like crazy, so-o even though he started it, I was the one who got in trouble.

I stomped on cracks all up and down the block. And the next day, she slipped into the garden and sprained her ankle.' 'Like stepping on a crack is supposed to break your mother’s back?' Harper asked. 'I tried that when I was

really little. I was so mad at Mom, but I do not even remember why now.

Harper laughed. 'It’s not like she broke her back. I mean, it was just a coincidence that she fell. But it scared me at the time. I thought I was powerful enchanter or something.'

Noah could see him mentally filing that away with all his other oddball stories. 'No way,' Aubrey said.

'And you avoided cracks for years after,' Rallie said. 'Remember that? You would be crazy careful,

always putting your feet sideways and going up on your tiptoes. You swerved around like a dumb butt.'

Dumb butt- Noah said automatically. For some reason, words were funnier smashed together. Rallie echoed, spinning on one toe, and then stumbling a little. 'Exactly.'

They passed the old Episcopalian church with the big spire as they headed down Main Street.

'That’s a good portmanteau,' said Aubrey. Noah nodded, the way he

usually did when he had no idea what Aubrey was talking about.

This was the town he had grown up in, and even though it was small and a lot of the stores on Main Street were closed, even though windows were boarded up and rentals went unrented, Noah was used to the place.

They walked past the barbershop, the pizza place where Noah had birthday parties when he was little, the bus station next to the post

office, and the big old graveyard on the hill. Noah had followed this exact route many times… his fingers curled in his mother’s when he was little and then gripping the handlebars of his bike when he was older, and now on foot to and from school.

He could not imagine living anywhere else, which was a real obstacle in imagining running away. 'For a while, my parents moved us around a lot, and there was this one apartment we lived in that was haunted. I swear-when the ghost was in

the room, the air would get cold, even in the middle of summer.

'That stuff is real,' Aubrey said. And there was one spot that was always ice-cold. You could put a space heater on top of it, and it would not warm up. That is where somebody died. The land-Girl even said so.'

'Did you ever actually see the ghost?' Rallie asked. Her cheeks were pink from the wind, and her eyes were bright. 'Have you ever heard this one? When you drive past a cemetery, you

must hold your breath. If you do not, the spirits of the newly dead can get in your body through your mouth, and then they can possess you.'

Aubrey shook his head. 'No, but sometimes he would move things. Like my mom’s keys. Mom would yell for the ghost to give them back, and then, nine times out of ten, she would find them right after. Mom says you have to know how to talk to ghosts or they’ll walk all over you.'

Harper smiled like she did when she was anticipating revealing something exciting-a twist to a story, a shocking turn, a villain’s big move.

Noah shivered, the hairs on his neck rising. Without meaning to, he imagined the taste of a ghost, like an acrid mouthful of smoke. He spat in the dirt, trying to untasted the idea.

Noah thought again about the night before and the feeling of something right behind him, breathing on his neck, something that was about

to reach out and grasp for him with its cold fingers.

'Ugh,' Rallie said into the silence that followed the end of Harper’s story. 'You made me hold my breath! I was just trying not to inhale. Anyway, we already passed the graveyard-should not you have told us the story before we passed it? Unless you wanted us to get possessed.'

The story was like that, grabbing hold of him and promising

that he would think about it every time he was near a graveyard.

'Maybe I’m not Harper anymore. I did not know to hold my breath and I learned the hard way. A spirit possessed me and now it is warning you because it is too late. The spirits are already inside you- 'Harper kept smiling. She made her eyes wide and spoke in a flat, affectless tone. 'That’s why it’s a scary story. Because you cannot do the one thing that would protect you-you will never know if you held your breath long enough or let it

out too soon. And you can’t hold your breath forever.'

'Come on, stop,' Rallie said, shoving Harper’s shoulder. They both began to laugh.

'The smiling was creepy,' said Noah. 'Anyone tell you that you have a creepy smile, Harper?' Aubrey laughed nervously along with them.

She looked incredibly pleased with herself.

They walked a few blocks more and then came to the place where

Aubrey split off for home. He waved goodbye and headed off, cutting across a big lawn toward a trailer park.

CHAPTER FOUR

Then it was just Rallie and Harper and Noah walking the few blocks to the development where their houses were clustered, all three identical from the outside. His heart started to speed up again and his legs turned to lead because there was no way to avoid the conversation that was

coming, even though he wanted to with all his might.

He thought of the folded-up Questions, still in his backpack, and of how he had said Tommesings's nightmare was being buried alive. THE AIR WAS COOL, THE TREES BRIGHT WITH YELLOW and red leaves, and lawns thick with a wilted carpet of brown. A gust of air shook the branches above Noah and blew his bangs over his eyes. He pushed them back impatiently and looked up at the cloudless sky. He thought of all of

them- all his characters, stuck in the duffel bag, rats chewing at the edges. He thought of bugs crawling over them and trash dumped on top of them.

'I can’t,' Noah said quickly. He had planned out a whole speech the night before, lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling of his room, but he could not remember any of it now. 'Hey,' said Rallie. 'Do you guys want to meet up? I have an idea for what might-' He took a deep breath and blurted out the only thing he could

think to say. 'I don’t want to play anymore.'

Harper frowned in confusion. 'What are you talking about?'

'I’ve been busy with school and basketball and everything,' he said instead, his voice low. 'I mean; you guys can keep playing or whatever.'

For a moment, it seemed possible to take the words back, to tell Harper and Rallie what had happened. He could explain what his dad had done and how angry he was and how he had

no idea what to do now except be angry. He could tell them how he did not want all the stories to remain unfinished. He could tell them how he felt like pieces of himself were gone, like part of him had been thrown out with his action figures.

'It’s just that we’re in the middle of something big. We came through the Gray Country and to the Blackest Sea. Couldn’t we just finish this part?'

'You mean ever? Like you don’t want to play ever again?' When Harper got upset, her neck would flush a blotchy red. He could see it coloring, as pink as her wind-whipped cheeks. She launched into a slightly desperate negotiation.

He had been looking forward to crossing swords with the leader of the mermaids, who knew the way to an ancient underwater city full of secrets-including the secret to completing the Princess’s quest and lifting her curse-plus there was the promise of fighting

sharks. There were even hints that they might find a clue to Tommy sings the Blade's parentage, plus the treasure of the Shark Prince-piles of gold and jewels so vast that Girl Jann had been questing after it since she had first heard the story as an orphan beggar child. Remembering how awesome it was going to be made every new thought about playing hurt like the back of a shoe rubbing against a burst blister.

Rallie looked stricken.

'We’re too old anyway, don’t you think?' he made himself say.

'We were,' Noah said, 'That’s stupid,' Harper said. 'We weren’t too old the day before yesterday.'

'It’s because of your friends on the team, isn’t it?' Rallie glanced over at Harper like they had had this conversation before. 'You think they’re going to find out and hassle you.'

'You don’t mean that,' Harper said.

'I don’t think anything.' Noah sighed. 'I just don’t want to play anymore.'

He forced the words out. 'I do.'

'Maybe we could just take a break,' Rallie said slowly. 'Do something else for a while.'

'And then maybe if you change your mind...'

'Sure,' he said with a shrug.

Before Girl Jann, Rallie’s favorite character had been a Barbie

named Aurora who had been raised by a herd of carnivorous horses. But on Monday morning, on the walk to school, Rallie explained that she had repainted an action figure from a thrift store over the weekend. She wanted to play somebody new. Noah thought about the time that Rallie had first brought her Girl Jann dollie to a game-three month back.

Jann was different, all right. She was a thief who had grown up on the streets of the biggest city in all their kingdoms, called Haven. And she

did not care about anything except for what she could steal and what fun she could have along the way.

Tommy sings had to bail her out of the situation after situation, until he finally got her to agree to stay aboard the Neptune's Pearl. Jann was crazy. She got a ride on Tommesings's ship because she wanted a ride to the Shark Prince's treasure, but every time he docked, Girl Jann kept stealing from people, so they had been banned from landing in at least five unusual places.

'I’m not going to change my mind,' Noah said numbly.

Rallie’s descriptions of Girl Jann’s antics had made Noah laugh so hard that his stomach hurt. His stomach hurt now, too, but for a different reason.

Except then she wound up doing things like climbing the mast with a blindfold on, just to show off.

We are in the middle of a scene. What happens to everyone else? What happens to Girl Jann? Even if she

gets away from the mermaids, what then? What about the crew?' 'But it doesn’t make any sense,' Harper said, not willing to let him off that easily. 'You can’t just stop.

'Maybe one of your people can take over as captain.' Noah hated the idea, but the Neptune’s Pearl was not a particular toy that one of them owned. It was just a cutout piece of paper, and there was no reason for him to hang on to it.

Tommy sings had promised Girl Jann that he would take her to the place marked on the map as the lair of the Shark Prince. He had sworn it on his honor and the Neptune’s Pearl.

'You figure it out. I don’t care anymore.'

'Maybe they’ll make her walk the plank,' said Harper.

'I don’t care what happens,' Noah said, and all the simmering anger at his father, at this conversation, and

everything bled into his voice then, turning it cruel.

Rallie was not allowed there, so it was a generous offer.

'Okay,' Rallie said, holding up her hands like she was surrendering. 'How about we walk over to the dirt mall? Whatever. See what is at the used bookstore and play the arcade games in the movie theater lobby. Like I said, a break.'

Or bike over.

'I don’t feel like it today,' Noah said. 'But thanks.' They were to his street, home. He picked up his pace.

'Did you finish the Questions?' Harper asked him.

He hitched his backpack higher on his shoulder and shook his head. The note was folded and tucked away in the front zippered pocket, scribbled on, and illustrated, full of proof that he did care. He could not give it to her.

She held out her hand.

'I didn’t answer them,' he said. 'What do you want?'

'Give me the paperback anyway. Maybe I’ll make up my answers.'

He frowned. 'I don’t have them anymore. I lost them.'

'They’re probably just in your bag, right?' Rallie said. 'You could look.'

'You lost them?' Harper yelled. He wondered if she was afraid of someone finding out what she had asked. He would have been.

'What happened?' Harper asked, grabbing his arm. 'What’s so different suddenly? Why are you so different?'

'Sorry,' Noah mumbled. 'As I said, I don’t know where they are.'

He turned to look at her. He had to get away before he said something that he could not take back. 'I don’t know. I don’t want to play, that’s all.'

'Fine,' Harper said. 'Just bring your people over one last time. One

final time. So that they can say goodbye to our people.'

'I can’t,' he said. 'I just can’t, Harper.'

'They’re not real, you know.' He knew he was being a jerk, but it felt good to lash out, even if was at the wrong person. 'They’re not real, and they can’t want anything. Stop being such a loser. You can’t play pretend forever.'

'I just want to say good-bye.' The hurt on Harper’s face was raw and

so much like his own that it was hard to look at her. 'They would want that. They'll miss Rose and Girl Jann and Aeryn and Lysander, even if you don't.'

Rallie sucked in her breath. The red blotches on Harper's neck had moved to her cheeks. She looked like she was about to cry or hit him; Noah was not sure which. With her blessing, all his crimes might be forgiven, his curse lifted, and Tommesings would be allowed to dock the Neptune's Pearl anywhere he wanted.

Noah hesitated. The Great Princess, who ruled over the Blue Hills, the Gray Country, the Land of the Witches, and the whole Blackest Sea. She would have information about Tommy sings the Blade's father.

The dollie was incredibly old, and according to Harper's mother- worth a lot of money. She would be worth a lot less if they touched her papery cotton dress or pawed at her brittle straw-gold curls. And if the Princess was freed from her cage, then who knew what that meant for the

world. It was an important thing for Harper to promise-especially because her mother would be furious if Harper took the dollie out from the cabinet.

When she spoke, though, her voice was flat and grim. 'The Princess-what if I take her out of the cabinet? I know where my mom keeps the key. I will play her. She knows all the secrets, and she will give you whatever you want. Everything. If you come tomorrow, you can have everything you want.'

For a moment, he had forgotten that there was no gamer. It was an unpleasant shock to remember. No matter how tempting it was, Noah could not play. There were no Tommy sings the Blade anymore.

'Sorry,' he said, turning toward his house with a shrug.

Harper made a strangled sound. Rallie said something under her breath.

Noah bent his head, closed his eyes, and kept walking.

'Your mother pointed out to me that if I want you to start acting like a grown-up, I can’t keep treating you like a kid,' his father was saying, sounding overly sincere. 'She’s right. I shouldn’t have tossed out your stuff, because it’s my job to guide you toward the right choices, not make all those choices for you.'

THAT NIGHT, AT the kitchen table, Noah poked at his baked chicken. He was not hungry.

The tone of his father’s voice made Noah think of last year when he had gotten into a fight at school. His mother had made him sit in the principal’s office until he was ready to tell Grayson Fatter that he was sorry for punching him, even though Noah had not been sorry at all. Noah’s father’s apology sounded as forced as he had been.

'I know that it’s hard to adjust to us being back together,' Mom said. 'But we’re going to keep working on it.

Noah, do you have anything you want to say?'

'Nope,' Noah said.

Finally, Noah nodded, because he did understand his father. He understood his wanting to make Mom happy. He understood not being sorry. It just did not make Noah forgive him.

'That’s okay,' said his dad, getting up from the table and clapping Noah on the shoulder. 'We understand each other, don’t we?'

An awkward silence stretched between them.

He tried not to think about the story, which would go on without him, flowing around the empty spaces where his characters used to be until they were swallowed up and forgotten. The next day,

Noah went to practice and tried to blot out thoughts of Harper and Rallie and his father by playing ball so aggressively that he got lectured by his

coach and benched for the rest of practice.

He thought again about running away, but the more time passed, the more he had realized that he had nowhere to go.

In the morning Noah asked her to drive him to school, and that afternoon he went home with Alex Rios. They played video games in Alex's finished basement on a bigger television than Noah had seen outside of a store.

Since his father was at the restaurant that night, his mother lets him eat ravioli from a can on the couch in front of the television. They did not talk much, although he caught her shooting him worried looks.

'Shut up,' Noah said, shoving Jack Lewis since he was standing closest.

'What?' Jack said. 'I didn’t say anything.'

The day after that, Rallie walked up to Noah while he was

shooting baskets at recess and pressed a note into his hand. A couple of the other guys yelled 'Go ask Rallie!' and 'Somebody’s got a girlfriend!' as she walked off, which made her hunch her shoulders like she was braced against a hard wind.

The note was folded up in a square this time, with his name carefully printed in Jon ink. When he opened it, there were only three short sentences on the lined paper:

It is nothing, Noah told himself.

Something happened with the Princess. Go to the hermit's place by the Blue Hills after school. It is important.

Important was underlined three times.

He thought of the Princess's fluttering lashes and the feeling of her closed eyes following him as he walked through the room.

This was just Harper and Rallie attempting to get him to show up so they could all have the same fight over

again. They wanted him to play, and he could not. There was nothing he could do except explaining why it was over, and he could not bring himself to do that.

The Princess was not real, though, so nothing important could have happened with her.

'What did the note say?' Alex asked. 'She tells you that she wants your skinny body?'

Noah tore it in half and then in half again. 'Nah. She just wants my math homework.'

There was no practice after school that day, but he stayed late anyway, pretending there was. He managed to talk the coach into letting him shoot hoops in the gym, which he did methodically, alone, letting himself drown in the thump of the ball, the squeak of his sneakers, and the familiar smell of fresh floor wax and old sweat.

CHAPTER FIVE

The moon was high enough to give the room an eerie blue glow. He could make out the familiar shapes of his furniture. His black cat was uncurling and stretching her long sleek body, claws digging into the coverlet. She padded up to him, her yellow eyes full of reflected light.

NOAH WOKE IN THE DARKNESS OF HIS BEDROOM. He was not sure why, but his heart raced, adrenaline pumping through his body, as though something had activated his body's fight-or-flight response. He

blinked in the dark, letting his eyes adjust.

'What is up?' he whispered to The Party, reaching out to pet her soft triangular head and press his thumb against her ear, folding it down and rubbing it. She butted against him and started to purr.

Bang- Tap-tap!

He jumped. The cat hissed, her white teeth flashing in the moonlight, and she jumped off the bed. Something small and hard had struck the window.

A sudden gust of wind made the branches outside shake and jitter. He could not help imagining the long, bony fingers of the trees scraping against the glass.

This was no echo of a dream, no made-up story. Something had hit the glass, smacking against one of the panes he could not see, one of the lower ones, hidden behind Jon half-curtains.

Then one night-quite randomly-he fell asleep with his head above the

covers like a normal person, and no monster got him. Over time he got spottier about observing his safety precautions until he routinely slept with an arm dangling off the side of his bed and his feet kicked free of the sheets.

When he was a little kid, he had had a firm belief in universally observed monster rules. He had been sure, for example, that if he kept all parts of himself on the mattress and shrouded beneath blankets if he kept his eyes closed, and if he pretended to

be asleep, then he would be safe. He did not know where he had gotten the idea from. He did remember his mother saying he would smother himself if he kept sleeping with his head under the comforter.

But right then, at the sound of the wind, for one panicky moment, all he wanted was to burrow under the blankets and never come out.

Tap- Tap - bang.

The thing hitting the window was just a branch, he told himself.

Or a neighbor cat trying to pick a fight with The Party.

Or an insomniac squirrel rattling around in the gutters.

Tap- Tap.

He was never going to be able to go back to sleep if he did not look. Noah slid out of bed, his bare feet padding over the carpet. Steeling himself and taking a deep breath, he pushed aside the curtain.

He was too surprised to shout. They had windblown hair and upturned

faces, and, for a moment, he did not know them. But then he realized it was only Harper and Rallie, not zombie girls, witches, or ghosts. Rallie lifted her hand in a shy wave. Harper had another handful of pebbles and looked ready to throw them at him.

There were a few scattered pebbles on the roof tiles in front of his window. That was the first thing he noticed. The second was that when he looked past the roof, he saw two dark figures looking up at him from the moonlit lawn.

He let out his breath and waved back a little unsteadily. His hammering heart started to slow.

Harper beckoned to him. Come down, she was signaling.

Noah backed away from the window. Quietly he went to the closet and pushed his feet into a pair of sneakers. He pulled a sweater over his T-shirt and crept downstairs in his alligator pajama bottoms.

He thought of the note that Rallie had passed him and the way she

had underlined important, but he could not think of anything so important that it would lead them to sneak out of their houses on a Friday night. Rallie's grandmother would ground her for the rest of forever if she found out.

The under-cabinet lights in the kitchen were bright enough to stumble through, and he managed to find his coat on a hook in the entranceway. The microwave showed the time in blinking green numbers: three minutes past midnight. Noah shouldered his coat on

and went outside, closing the door before the cat could slip through.

Harper and Rallie were waiting for him. The Party followed, mewling plaintively, hoping to be fed. 'Hey,' he whispered into the dark. 'What’s going on? What happened?'

'Sh-h-h-h a,' Harper said. 'You’ll wake up everyone. Come on.'

'Where to?' He asked, looking back at his house. There was a light on in his parents’ bedroom upstairs. Sometimes his mother stayed up late to

read; sometimes she fell asleep with the light on. If she was still awake, the sound of them talking might carry up to her, but he wanted to know something before he just followed Rallie and Harper into the night.

'The Blue Hills,' Rallie said.

That was a junkyard that specialized in metal about half a mile from their houses. The owner bought everything from car parts to tin cans and, although no one was sure what he did with them other than let them rust

in huge mounds on his property, they were an impressive sight. The stripped rods, machine parts, and batteries gleamed like mountains of blue, so that is why they had started calling it the Blue Hills. They had produced a whole storyline, including dwarves and trolls and a princess dollie that Harper had painted blue.

Noah jogged behind Harper and Rallie, the wind cutting through his thin pajamas, making him feel both cold and ridiculous. After a few minutes, Harper pulled a flashlight out of her

jacket and clicked it on. It Illuminare only a narrow patch of grass and dirt, so she had to swing it back and forth to see much.

There was the same old high chain-link fence around the property that Noah remembered. And there was the same old abandoned shed that they had found a few summers ago and used as a clubhouse until Rallie's grandmother had found out about it and given them a speech about tetanus and how it led to something she called lockjaw. Noah was not sure lockjaw

was a real thing, but he thought about it every time his neck felt stiff.

They had not been there since- or at least, he had not. He wondered if Harper and Rallie snuck out to the shed without him. They seemed full of secrets tonight. The only secret he had was one he wished he did not.

Rallie opened the creaky old door and went inside. He followed nervously.

'So, are you going to tell me what’s going on?' Noah asked, sitting

down across from Harper. The wood planks were cold under his pajama pants, and he shifted, trying to get comfortable.

Harper sat down on the splintery floor, cross-legged, setting the flashlight against her sneakers, so it lit her face. Then she unhooked her backpack from one shoulder, pulling it around onto her lap.

She unzipped her bag. 'You’re going to laugh,' she said. 'But you shouldn’t.'

He tried to suppress a shudder. Ghosts were not something you talked about in an abandoned shed at night. 'You’re just trying to freak me out. This is stupid-'

He glanced over at Rallie. She was leaning against one wall of the shed. 'Harper saw a ghost,' she said.

Harper carefully took the bone China dollie from her backpack. Noah drew in his breath and went silent. The Princess’s dull black eyes were open, her gaze boring into his own. He had

always thought she was creepy looking, but in the reflected beam of the flashlight, she seemed demonic.

'The Princess,' Noah said unsteadily, forcing a sneer into his voice to cover his rising fear. 'So what? You brought me out here to see a dollie?'

Harper touched the doll's face. It was pure white, like a dinner plate. Hair, dry as brush bristles, was threaded into her scalp, and her cheeks and lips were rouged a faint pink. When

she was tilted onto her back, her eyes stayed open instead of closing the way they should have, as though she was still watching Noah. There was a tear at the shoulder of her thin, brittle gown and tiny pinholes through the discolored fabric. It had not aged as well as the rest of the dollie-and the ride in Harper’s backpack had not helped.

'Just listen,' Rallie said. 'Try not to be the huge jerk you’ve turned into.

'I know you told us you weren’t going to come over the other day, but I thought you might anyway,' Harper said, talking fast. 'And I couldn’t just go in the cabinet and get the Princess if Mom were there.

Rallie never said stuff like that, especially not to him. It stung.

So, I took the dollie out of the case that night when we had the argument and moved around some of Mom’s other stuff to hide what I had

done. But that night-well, I saw the dead girl.'

'You mean you had a nightmare,' Noah said.

'Just shut up a minute,' said Rallie.

It reminded Noah of the way Harper talked when she played villains or even the Princess herself. 'It wasn’t like dreaming at all. She was sitting on the end of my bed. Her hair was blond, like the dollies, but it was tangled and dirty. She was wearing a nightdress

smeared with mud. She told me I had to bury her. She said she couldn’t rest until her bones were in her own grave, and if I didn’t help her, she would make me sorry.' 'It wasn’t like a regular dream,' Harper said, her fingers smoothing back the Princess’s curls and her voice changing, going soft and chill as the night air.

Rallie shifted uncomfortably. Noah was silent for a long moment, arrested by the images Harper had conjured. He could almost see the girl in her stained nightgown.

Harper paused, as though she was expecting him to say something sarcastic.

'Her bones?' he finally echoed.

'Did you know that bone China has real bones in it?' Harper said, tapping a porcelain cheek. 'Her clay was made from human bones. Little-girl bones. That hair threaded through the scalp is the little girl’s hair. And the body of the dollie is filled with her leftover ashes.'

What is the punch line? Did one of you rig a sheet outside to flutter from a tree or something?'

A shiver ran up his spine. He closed his eyes to keep from looking at the dollie in Harper’s lap. 'Okay, this is your idea of a funny prank. I get it. You are mad at me for not playing the game anymore, so you made up this story to scare me.

'I told you,' Rallie said to Harper, under her breath.

'No, idiot,' said Rallie. 'I told her that you wouldn’t believe us and that you wouldn’t want to help.'

'You did rig a sheet?' Noah frowned, looking out at the trees and the mounds of cans and metal.

He threw up his hands in confusion. 'Help with what? Help you bury a dollie? Why would you need to wake me up in the middle of the night to help you do that?'

Harper pulled the dollie to her chest, and one of the eyes closed and

opened, as though it was winking at him. 'Skylar Stella is real. That is the dollie-girl’s name. She told me about herself. Her father was worker for a China manufacturer, designing and decorating pottery, and when Skylar died, her dad went crazy. He could not bear to put her in the ground, so he took her body back to the kilns at his job, chopped her up, and cremated her. 'She told you that?' It was too easy to imagine the dollie moving on her own, fluttering her painted eyelids and turning toward him. Maybe opening her

tiny rosebud of a mouth to scream. He ground up to her burnt bones and used them to make a batch of bone China, then poured it into a mold cast from one of Skylar’s favorite dollies. So, her grave stayed empty.' Noah tried to swallow, although his throat suddenly felt very dry.

'She’s not going to rest until we bury her. And she is not going to let us rest either. She promised to make us miserable unless we help her.' 'Each night she told me a little bit more of her

story.' Illuminare by the flashlight, Harper’s face had become strange.

And I am still not sure but show him the thing. It’s pretty convincing.' He looked at Rallie. 'And you believe it? You believe all of this?' 'I never believed in ghosts, so not at first,' Rallie said. 'No offense, Harper, but it’s a crazy story.

'Show me what?'

Harper pulled the dolly's head sharply up from the body. Noah gasped at the sudden violence of it, but all that

it revealed was a string-and-rusty-metal-hook apparatus. With a twist, the Princess’s head came entirely off, leaving the hook still attached to the neck, hanging from the cord. Harper slid her fingers into the body of the dollie, feeling around like she was trying to reach something.

Harper drew out an old burlap bag from the neck cavity. 'Here, take this and look inside.' 'What are you doing?' He stared at the disembodied head resting on Harper’s knee. The eyes were closed now. The bag was full,

but Noah could not tell what it was full of. He took the rough cloth as she turned the beam of the flashlight on it, revealing letters and dates in blocky print.

'Eaton?' he read aloud. He had a vague memory of the place from some late-night British rock documentary his mom had been watching. 'That’s where the Beatles are from-in Eaton. There is no way we can go there. I guess we’re going to have to find out if ghost girls really can curse people, because-'

So, we could get on a bus and be there by morning.' She paused. 'And we are. We are going. Tonight. Well, technically, it’s morning, so we’re going in the morning.' 'That’s what I thought at first,' Rallie said and pointed to the markings. 'But look again. It says, East Eaton. In Ohio.

He looked from the dollie to Rallie and then to Harper. 'Therefore, you brought me out here?'

'We tried to explain yesterday,' Rallie said. 'I told you it was important.'

Harper reached down and turned the flashlight beam on her watch, then shone it at him. 'There’s a bus stopping in town at two fifteen in the morning. It is coming from Philadelphia and going to Youngstown. One of the stops is East Eaton. Rallie said she’d come if you would too.'

Was she trying to play a different kind of game? A game that she was making out of their real lives. But Harper did not look gleeful, the way she did when she had a thrilling idea. She looked pale and nervous like she

had not been sleeping well. Noah thought about the ghost story that Harper had told on their last walk home, the one about holding your breath when you passed a cemetery.

Rallie shrugged.

'You'll go?' he asked finally, looking at Rallie. Her grandmother would not like a single thing about this: not the ghost, not the bus, not Rallie being out at two in the morning with a boy-even if the boy were just him.

Noah’s parents would not like him going either, but that was a point in favor of the plan, as far as he was concerned. And if he decided that he never wanted to come back, well, at least he would have some company while he figured out where he was going. In real life, he was not sure there were any equivalent jobs. In stories, orphan boys became assistant pig keepers and magician’s apprentices.

'You still haven’t looked in the bag,' Rallie said, pointing to the burlap sack he was holding. 'It’s pretty weird.'

Harper handed Rallie the flashlight. She held it up high, pointing it down at him. With trepidation, he pulled the drawstrings so that he could peer inside.

Of course. The leftover ashes. The remains of a ghost. Of a girl. Of the Princess.

For a moment, Noah did not know what he was seeing. The bag was

full of something that looked a little bit like dark sand with chunks of shells in it. Then he realized that the bag was full of gray ash, and what he had thought were shells were sharp, pale pieces of bone.

A nameless primal terror washed over him. He wanted to drop the bag, wanted to race out of the shed, and go back to bed where he could shiver under his covers. But he did not move. His hands started to shake, and he drew the strings tight, so he did not have to look anymore.

Despite her words, Rallie’s voice grew a little uncertain. Noah wondered if she had balked at first before she had promised Harper that if he went, she would go too.

'Harper thinks we can catch a bus back in the afternoon and be home by dinnertime. It is only a three-hour ride, but there are not a lot of buses from here to there-just this one early in the morning, and another in the afternoon that gets in too late for us to ride back in time. We left a note for her parents.'

'If these bones are real,' he began, 'shouldn’t we tell someone? A girl died. Skylar’s father murdered her. Maybe it’s cold-case file.'

'No one’s going to care about some old story,' Harper said. 'And even if they did, they’d just take the dollie away from us-put her in a museum or display her somewhere-and then her spirit would be angry.'

He paused, considering everything she had said and what she had not said. 'Did you find the ashes

before or after you dreamed about Skylar Stella?'

'I’m going whether you both come or not,' Harper said, snatching the burlap bag out of his hand. He guessed that meant she had found the ashes first. 'Whether you believe me or not, I’m going to bury her as she wants.'

Getting on a bus in the middle of the night to a place they had never been daunting. It also seemed a little bit like an adventure.

'Okay,' he said. 'Fine. I'll come.'

Rallie looked at him in wide-eyed surprise. He wondered for the first time if she had been planning on him saying no and had not considered the possibility that he would say yes. If so, she should have told him.

Okay? No more hassling me about it.'

'I'll come,' he continued, 'so long as you both promise not to ask me about the game or why I don't want to play. 'Okay,' said Harper.

'Okay,' said Noah.

'Okay,' said Rallie.

'You need to get ready fast,' Harper said. 'And leave a note so your parents don’t freak out. Just tell them you got up early and that you’ll be back tonight.'

'Yes,' Harper said. 'I planned it all out. Just bring food and supplies, okay, Noah? We’ll meet at the mailbox in twenty minutes.'

'And you’re sure the bus will get us back in time?' Rallie asked. 'You’re positive?'

She switched off the flashlight and, for a moment, the shed was plunged into darkness.

By the time they did, Harper had put away the Princess, so at least her terrible head with its winking eye was hidden. Noah blinked, willing his eyes to adjust.

There was a quiet that hung over the world in the middle of the

night, as though there was no one else awake anywhere. It felt ripe with magic and endless possibility. Noah walked home through the hushed streets; his sneakers wet with dew from the frosted grass.

He did find a can of orange soda, a package of saltine crackers, three oranges, red Twizzlers, and a jar of peanut butter, all of which he stuffed into his backpack.

His mother did not have either of those things nor did she have elven

limbs, which had kept Joseph and Samantha from starving on the way to Mount Doom and always made him think of matzoth (which his mom also did not have).

He snuck back into his house and stood for a long moment in the dark kitchen, a feeling of great daring swelling his heart. When he finally went to the cabinets, he felt as though he was provisioning himself for one of those epic fantasy quests-the kind that required a lot of jerkies or something called hardtack that he had read about

soldiers eating during the Civil War and which he thought might be a kind of bread.

In his room, Noah changed into jeans, switched out his sweater for a zip-up sweatshirt, and packed a few other random things he thought he might need: twenty-three dollars (twenty of which had come from his aunt in a card for his birthday), a book identifying poisonous plants (in case they needed to live in the wild and eat berries, which admittedly seemed like a remote possibility), and a sleeping bag

that was a little too small for him but worked okay as a blanket when completely unzipped. In the hall closet, he found a flashlight, and he picked up a garden spade from beside the back door.

Before he left, he wrote out the note and propped it up on his bed. It read:

Got up early. Gone to play basketball. Might not be back for dinner.

Might not be back forever, he thought but did not write.

As he left the house, closing the door quietly behind him, he wondered, for a moment, again, if this was a trick. A lie. Harper's attempt at one last game.

Nonetheless, the ashes had seemed real, he reminded himself.

In the end, he was not sure if he went because he half believed in the ghost already or because he was used to following Harper's lead in a story, or

simply because leaving allowed him to run away and still believe he could come back.

If he wanted.

CHAPTER SIX

Noah's mother's parents, now living permanently in Florida, would tell stories about how things used to be. About how the big Victorian houses-the ones built by some famous architect, the ones that were in the center of town used to be owned by single

families and not divided into run-down apartments.

NOAH WAS USED TO STORIES WITHOUT HAPPY Endings. His dad called where they lived West of Nowhere, Pennsylvania, claiming it bordered Better Off Forgotten, West Virginia, and Already Forgotten, Ohio. When Noah was little, those had seemed like magical place names before he realized they were just sarcasm. Noah's mother had gone to school to be an art therapist, but the

only place she could get work was in a juvenile detention center. If she wanted the kids there to do art, she had to bring the supplies and collect them after each session because her supervisor was afraid of the kids jabbing each other's eyes out with markers.

His grandmother told stories about the people she had known when she was a little girl, people who got out of town and made it elsewhere. The happiest the stories got was when his parents talked about how things were

going to get better, although neither one of them really seemed to believe it, and Noah did not believe it anymore either.

That was all. It was as if the town had gravitational influence on the people who lived there. But even as Noah thought that he knew it was just another story. Dad was back because he had not been able to hack it in the city.

When Noah’s dad left three years ago, he said he was going to run

his restaurant in Philadelphia, and he was going to Italy to study how pasta was made and he was getting a late-night spot on a local cable channel and would parlay that into a fortune. But two months later, he moved back and into one of the crappy apartments in the biggest and worst-kept Victorian and drifted in and out of Noah's life, until he finally drifted back to their house.

He wondered whether growing up was learning that most stories turned out to be lies.

Rallie was in a big shapeless red coat. Both had backpacks slung over their shoulders. The bus stop was cold enough that Noah’s breath clouded in the air. The wind had picked up. It washed over them as they huddled together against the brick exterior of the post office. In the flickering streetlight, Noah could see the girls better. Harper had pulled back her coppery hair into a ponytail and was wearing a dark-green sweater with jeans and tall brown boots.

He felt his gaze going to Harper's backpack, knowing the Princess was inside and knowing, without knowing how he knew, that her eyes were open. He felt the weight of her stare on his back when he turned away. The hairs on the back of his neck stuck up, tickling his skin, and making him shiver.

A while back they had seen a police car from a way off and had pressed themselves against the wall of the building. As they hid, Harper muttered the whole time about the

vividness of Rallie's coat giving them away and Rallie muttered back about how she had just packed for a sleepover because she had not thought they were taking off somewhere harebrained that very night. But the police car had turned onto Main Street and away from them. And the next car that passed was a truck. It did not even slow.

The bus was already fifteen minutes late, and there was no sign of it or any other vehicle on the road.

Rallie yawned. 'Maybe we should go back. It doesn’t look like the bus is coming.'

Noah, impelled by the impulse that makes yawns catch, yawned too.

'Stop,' Harper said. 'We just have to wait a little longer.'

'You can’t be mad at us for being tired,' Noah said.

Harper was still upset, but she did not argue with him. 'We’ll sleep on the bus.'

Rallie bit her lip and looked hopefully at the stretch of empty road. She looked happier the longer they waited. Noah was sure she was betting on the bus not coming and the three of them going back to their beds, having had a nice little middle-of-the-night adventure. He could tell Rallie did not want to be the one who chickened out, but she also did not want to go. If Rallie's grandmother found out about any of this, there would be no more play practice, no more sleepovers, no

more chance of hanging out with Noah or Harper. Ever.

Noah understood all that and he felt bad for her, but not bad enough to say anything. Selfishly, he wanted her along.

'Two more minutes,' said Rallie, 'and then we go back. I’m freezing.'

Harper did not reply.

Looking at the bus stop sign, Noah thought about what it would be like to get off at a place like this in a

different town, one he had no idea how to navigate. 'When we get to East Eaton, you know where we are supposed to go, right? What cemetery Skylar is supposed to be buried in and how to find the grave. You know all that, right?'

'One minute, fifty-nine seconds,' Rallie said. 'One minute, fifty-eight seconds.'

Harper opened her mouth and hesitated over the answer. Just then a bus turned the corner three blocks

away, washing them with its headlights. He did not realize how worried Harper had been that it was not coming until he saw how relieved she looked like the bus drew closer. Rallie’s face froze in an expression of dread.

'No,' she said, looking back down the street, away from the bus, and sighing. 'It’s not that. I am only tired. Anyway, if I snuck back into my house when I am supposed to be sleeping at Harper’s, Grandma would have a lot of questions.'

'You don’t have to go,' he whispered to her, deciding he could be only so much of a jerk.

Somehow the parent who was giving them a ride did not come on time, or it took too long to drop everybody off, but Rallie wound up home a half-hour late. That was all it took. Boom. She was in mega-trouble. No phone calls. No Internet. No nothing.

The last time Rallie had gotten busted for staying out after curfew, she

would get grounded for a solid month. She had been to the movie version of one of her favorite musicals, along with some of her theater the door opened with a creak of gears. An old man with a short white beard looked down at them. A small gold hoop hung from one of his ears, and he had a face that reminded Noah of a gruff and unfriendly wizard. 'Well, get on if you’re getting on.' friends and Harper.

So even though he knew that she was not telling the whole truth about wanting to go, given that she was

likely to get in trouble, either way, he figured she might as well have an adventure and hope for the best.

Harper, Noah, and Rallie climbed the steps, each feeding cash into a machine beside the driver. It printed three tickets and dispensed change into a bowl with a clatter. Noah shuffled down the aisle, past a knitting woman and three college-age guys asleep in their seats, past a guy muttering to himself and looking out the window.

Noah went all the way to the back of the bus, following Harper. They sat in the long last seat. A moment later Rallie joined them, squeezing in next to the window.

Noah looked at Harper's backpack resting on the floor and wondered whether Harper had reattached the Princess's head or whether it would roll around in the bottom of her bag when the bus turned corners. He thought he could see a few threads of her blond hair peeking out

from where the zipper was not fully closed.

'See,' Harper said, pulling her legs up so that she was sitting on her feet in a weird yoga pose. 'Everything’s going according to plan.'

'I can’t believe the bus came,' Rallie said faintly.

The bus lurched forward, pulling away from the bus stop, and despite everything, Noah started to grin.

'You never really answered me before,' Noah said. 'Do you know where the cemetery is? Do you know where we’re going, Harper?'

They were left home by themselves-going on a real adventure, the kind that changed you. He felt a thrill run through him.

'The grave is under a willow tree. Skylar will tell us the rest.'

'Skylar will tell us?' He asked in a quiet, urgent voice.

'She told me this much, didn’t she?' Harper answered, and then in that way she had, where Noah was sure she wasn’t right yet somehow, she seemed right, she added neatly and unanswerable, 'If you didn’t believe me, why did you come?'

Rallie leaned against the window and pulled her legs up onto the seat, resting one shoe against Noah’s leg. She looked exhausted, but no longer unhappy. 'I’m going to try to sleep.' Exasperated, he mimed banging

his head against the back of the seat. Harper ignored him.

He rested a hand on her ankle so it would not slip.

'We should take shifts,' Harper said. 'Keep watch. Like you are supposed to on a quest. So, we don’t miss our stop.'

'Okay,' Noah said, sticking out a fisted hand. 'Rock, paper, scissors.'

She still beat him, throwing a rock to his scissors. He stuck with scissors and tricked Harper, who threw

paper, expecting him to change moves. And then Rallie beat Harper, sticking Harper with first watch, Noah with second, and Rallie, third. Noah rested his head against his backpack and closed his eyes.

Rallie held out her hand and blinked muzzily like she was trying to stay awake.

He did not think he would be able to go to sleep, but he must have dozed off because it seemed like

moments later, he awoke to Harper’s sharp yelp.

He sat up. The old guy who had been talking to himself had moved to the seat in front of them. He was leaning close to Harper and just letting go of a strand of her hair.

'I was just kidding you. Come on, you are a cute little thing. Isn't you used to be teased?' His bad breath washed over Noah, bringing with it a molding smell, like wet clothes left in the washing machine overnight and

sneakers after a long game. His hair was wild tangled curls, shot through with gray, and he had a scraggly beard hiding half of his windblown face. Nicotine stains darkened the ends of his pale fingers. 'That your brother? Don’t he tease you?'

'Yes, he’s my brother,' Harper lied quickly. 'And he doesn’t like it if I talk to strangers.'

He sounded teasing all right but in a bad way. A scary way. 'That bus driver-you can’t trust him. He is

senile as a moose. And sometimes he gets aliens in him.'

He cackled, revealing a black gap where a few bottom teeth should have been. He turned his attention to Noah. 'I was just telling your smart-mouth little sister here that you can’t be sure this bus is going to take you where you want to go.'

Rallie shifted and opened her eyes, blinking away dreams. When she saw the old guy, her eyes went wide,

and she grabbed her bag. 'What’s going on?'

His father would say that as the boy, it was his responsibility to protect the girls. That made him even more scared because he was afraid, he had let them down. 'Thanks for the advice.'

'Okay,' Noah told the man, leaning forward, trying to get between him and Harper.

The old guy’s grin widened. 'Oh, the little man is going to give

Kanth Jones the brush-off. Do you want to fight? Do you want to show off for the girls? And who is that one over there? She is no sister of yours. Just what is it that you three are doing, anyway? Running off from home?' Rallie leaned forward. 'We’re not doing anything.'

'Look, we appreciate you coming over and talking with us,' Harper said placatingly. 'But if that’s all-'

'Crazy as anything. Sometimes he gets a little lost. Sometimes he just parks and gets out of the bus, wanders around for a while. And sometimes he has meetings with them-them things. In their shiny spaceship. You can see the lights. Just leaves us out here for as long as it takes him to communicate.'

'Senile as all get out.' Kanth tapped his head and made a swirly motion with his finger, returning to his favorite subject-the bus driver.

Rallie elbowed Noah and raised her eyebrows, eyes wide.

'Okay,' Harper said. 'We'll watch out for that.

'You've got really pretty hair too,' Kanth Jones said, turning to Rallie with a sly grin. His fingers darted out to tug at one of her braids. 'Like little ropes.'

Rallie jerked back.

'Don't touch her,' Noah said.

'Oh, possessive, huh? Well then, what if I talk to your sister and leave the two of you alone?' Kanth grabbed Harper’s arm. She pushed herself back against the cushion and out of the range of his hand before he could touch her.

Well, I am not going to talk to the blond-haired person, so you better forget that idea. I do not like the way she is looking at me. She is going to tell you that she had never hurt anybody, but do not you listen. She had hurt you, all right. She’d hurt you and she’d like

it.' The man laughed. 'You all are jumpy; you know that? Real paranoid.

'Hey!' Noah said.

None of them were blond. As far as Noah could tell, no one on the bus was blond. He wondered what it was like to be so crazy that you saw things that were not there. He wondered if when you hallucinated, the stuff you were imagining was just as clear as the regular stuff, or if it were hazy at the edges so that if you concentrated, you could tell.

'It’s time for you to sit somewhere else,' Rallie told him, drawing herself up impressively as she did on stage at the school play. 'I might not look like it, but I am their sister. I am adopted. And I don’t want you to talk to my brother like that anymore.'

'Aw, C'mon,' he said, reaching into his front breast pocket and coming out with a small paper bag-wrapped bottle. 'I have a black belt. You’ll need me when the aliens come.'

'You wait and see. Those drivers going to roll on out of this bus and leave all of us alone, and when he comes back, he is going to have a new face. The aliens ride around in his skin. So, when he does that, who are you going to tell?'

The bus turned a corner and started to slow. There was a brightly lit bus station up the road. Noah feels relieved.

The rest of the bus was quiet and dark, the only lights in two strips

down the center aisle and near the front, where the knitting Girl sat. It seemed like a vast distance. There was only the click of her needles and the sound of the man’s voice.

In just a couple of minutes, they would be able to get off the bus, but what then? It was too soon for this to be East Eaton. This was just a random stop in a random town they did not know.

'You be careful,' Kanth Jones said, looking right at Noah. 'You better

not let them get taken. That is your job as a brother. You the man in the family, and you got to fight to make sure the aliens do not steal their faces. Aliens like red hair. They take you down in the diamond ghost caves and you never come out again.'

'But aliens don’t live underground,' Rallie said, completely incapable of not pointing out when something did not make sense. 'They live in the sky. In spaceships.'

The bus stopped, its engine grinding. The door opened and the overhead lights came on, making Kanth’s skin look sallow. He took a swig from the paper-bag-covered bottle. Then he stood up.

Noah widened his eyes, trying to signal her not to say anything that would agitate Kanth Jones.

They looked at one another.

Shows what you know. No, the safest thing is for you all to stay right here on the bus.'

'I’ve got to use the bathroom,' Noah said.

'What if we need to protect him?' Rallie asked, standing up.

'Then you go,' Kanth Jones said. 'I’ll protect these ladies and make sure you got the same face you left with.'

Kanth Jones shook his head. 'You can’t go where he’s going.'

And if he took this route, he must have harassed passengers before. The bus driver would come back, say a

few things, and Kanth Jones would go back to his seat. Everything would work out.

For a horrible moment, Noah worried that Kanth Jones was going to block the aisle and make it impossible for them to exit. But then the bus driver stood up and turned his head toward them. Noah feels relieved.

If Kanth Jones knew the driver well enough to complain about him constantly stopping for aliens, he must take this route a lot.

But the driver just took a long look at Noah, Harper, and Rallie and got off the bus. He did not say or do a single thing to help them.

Kanth Jones wore a smirk on his face as he had known all along, he was not going to get in trouble.

Kanth Jones grabbed for Rallie, and she gave a single, blood-curdling shriek, loud enough for the frat boys to wake up and the knitting Girl to turn around in her seat. Loud enough for Kanth to let Rallie go in surprise.

Harper shoved past him with a suddenness that got her through before he could react. While Kanth Jones gaped at her, Noah charged down the aisle, catching Rallie’s hand and pulling her with him.

'Don’t come crying to me when the aliens take your faces!' he yelled after them.

There were benches and vending machines and bright fluorescent lights. Rallie collapsed onto

a bench, her eyes a little wet. She looked as freaked out as Noah felt.

The bus driver was smoking a cigarette, talking to two station employees, when they charged past him and into the building.

'This was your plan,' Noah said, and then regretted it. He knew he was not being fair, but he was tired and upset and had no idea what to do himself. He felt useless. Noah took Harper’s arm. 'Right now. Come. Go.'

'What are we going to do?' Harper asked, pacing back and forth, backpack over one shoulder.

'We can’t get back on that bus,' said Rallie.

'Maybe we could tell someone- like a cop. There has to be a cop around a late-night bus station, right?'

Noah looked over at the bus driver. One station employee was speaking into a walkie-talkie. The other was watching the three of them.

'Yes, and they'll ask us how old we are.' Rallie shook her head. 'And call our families. No.'

'We have to get out of here,' Noah said.

'Why?' asked Rallie. Then she noticed the three men standing together and got up quickly, swinging her bag onto her shoulder.

'But we didn't do anything,' Harper said, walking along with him. 'Why would they be after us? Why not

do something about that guy? He’s the one-'

'Because we’re kids,' Noah whispered, cutting her off.

'We’re being too obvious,' Rallie said under her breath. 'Harper, we should go into the girls’ room and sneak out from there. Noah, meet us outside. Get something from the vending machine.

Everyone, go slow.'

Noah took a deep breath and then spoke loudly and as casually as he

could, 'I’ll meet you guys back on the bus.'

Rallie smiled and nodded exaggeratedly, playing casual too now. Harper tried to follow her lead.

One of the bus station employees had peeled away from the others and was heading in Noah’s direction, his shoe falls echoing in the most space. He was not rushing, but he had too much purpose in the way he moved to be just strolling. Noah started toward the door, deliberately not

running despite wanting to. He paused a minute to look at the vending machine. In its reflection, he saw the station guy drawing closer, his Jon uniform making him seem ominously authoritative.

Noah moved toward the door.

'Hey, you, there,' the station guy called to him.

But Noah was out through the doors and turning a corner of the building and seeing Rallie lowering herself from the girls’ bathroom

window. Harper jumped out after her and they were off and running into the darkness of an unknown town.

CHAPTER SEVEN

'Where are we?' Rallie asked finally, her breath clouding in the air.

All the adrenaline Noah had felt back in the station burned off him, and he felt tired down to the marrow of his bones. Eye-droopingly exhausted. He leaned against the brick wall and

wondered if it was possible to fall asleep standing up.

'And how are you going to get out of here?' asked Noah, pushing off from the wall. 'We don’t even know what town we’re in.'

THEY HUDDLED IN THE DARK BEHIND A TATTOO PARLOR and watched as the bus pulled out of the station in a cloud of exhaust, taking with it both the crazy guy and their chances of getting to East Eaton by morning.

Harper followed. 'There are only two buses to East Eaton that take this route, and if we wait to take the next one-in the afternoon-then we won’t have enough time to take the bus back by tonight.'

'Forget East Eaton. We’ve got to get home,' Rallie said, digging out the cell phone that she was only allowed to use for emergencies.

'Sure,' Noah said. 'But we cannot do that, either can we?'

Rallie took the bus schedule and opened it, studying the names of stations as though she were going to be able to figure out where they were just by finding a name that struck her as feeling like the right one.

'Hold on,' Noah said, walking the other way down the alley so that he could see the front of the bus station. He walked back again. 'East Rochester. There’s a sign that says so-but where is that?'

Harper pulled the bus schedule from one of her pockets, along with a raggedy map. 'You can look at this stuff if you want, but it’s not going to tell you anything I haven’t already told you.'

Harper crowded next to Rallie, so they were squinting together at the schedule in the dim moonlight. 'There were only two more stops before East Eaton,' Harper said finally. 'We almost made it.'

'We’re not even out of Pennsylvania yet,' said Rallie. 'We didn’t almost make anything.'

Rallie pulled her coat more tightly around her, sitting down on the back steps of a building. Dumpsters loomed to one side of her. 'Can you call Tom and see if he’ll pick us up?' Her voice sounded on the verge of panic. Calm, but not likely to stay that way.

Harper unfolded the map and tapped it grandly. 'Look, that says

Ohio.' Then she shook her head. 'Oh, it says Ohio River.'

Harper just looked at her. 'My brother will never come all the way here. Not in that junked car of his.'

Harper shook her head. 'She broke her phone and hasn’t gotten a new one yet. I couldn’t get ahold of her if I wanted to.'

'Your sister, then?' Rallie asked, chewing on the end of one of her braids.

Rallie looked at the face of her phone, frowning. 'I guess I could call my aunt Linda. She'd be mad, but she'd come.'

'Would she tell your grandmother?' Noah asked.

Noah tried to imagine a single thing they could tell Rallie's grandmother to try and make sense of what they had done. She would not want to hear about a creepy, possibly-still-headless dollie, a ghost, and a

curse that, more likely than not, did not even exist.

Rallie sighed heavily, a little shudder going across her shoulders. 'Probably. And then I will get grounded forever and must quit the play and be miserable. But what else are we going to do?'

'I won’t go back,' Harper said, sitting on the steps next to Rallie. 'I’m going to wait for the next bus and keep going.'

'But you said that the next bus wasn’t coming until the afternoon, so you won’t make it home before Sunday,' Rallie said. 'Where would you sleep?'

Harper took a deep but unsteady breath. Noah could see that the idea of Rallie leaving her made Harper feel a lot less daring. He did not want Rallie to go either; she was good at making crazy ideas work. If Rallie is right. We can bury the Princess next weekend or the weekend after that,' Noah said. 'What’s the difference?'

Harper produced the idea that they needed an ancient temple under the waves, Rallie was the one who would find the discarded chunks of concrete to build it. Her going home would signal that they were doing something dumb.

You guys will make excuses and I will chicken out and Skylar will find someone else to haunt because I will not be interesting enough to have a ghost talk to me. I don't deserve to be the hero of a story, and I won’t be one.'

Harper’s shoulders hunched forward as she got tenser. 'If we do not keep going now, we’ll never do it. We just will not.

'Everyone has a story,' Rallie murmured. 'Everyone’s the hero of their story. That’s what Ms. Evans said in English.'

'No,' Harper said, her deep voice very fierce. 'There are people who do things and people who never do-who say they will someday, but they just don’t. I want to go on a quest. I have

always wanted to go on a quest. And now that I have one, I am not backing down from it. I’m not going home until it’s complete.'

And he decided that even if it was dumb, he wanted to be the kind of person who was interesting enough to have a ghost talk to him. Even if the idea of the Princess being made of bones and filled with human ash grew more frightening the farther, they got from home. Noah thought she might be right. He thought of his dad, who wanted to do things and then did not.

Rallie laughed a little, uncomfortably, like what Harper said about being a hero had hit a little close to home for her, too.

Leaving in the middle of the night and escaping from the bus station already seemed like the kinds of things that happened on quests, so from that perspective, they were doing well. And thinking that made his tired brain slip into playing mode, which led to thinking like Tommesings.

'What if we don’t go back right away?' he asked suddenly. 'If we do not call anyone, we do not get in trouble, right? No one will know what happened. So, if you take the bus back tonight-not the one to East Eaton, the one back home-then your grandmother will never know anything. Or we could even make it to East Eaton and take the bus back from there. There must be a way for us to get there-we could walk if we must. It cannot be that many miles up the river. And the quest would be

completed, despite some slight setbacks.'

'In the dark?' Rallie asked.

'We might as well try,' Harper said, brightening. 'And you do not want to get in trouble, right?'

'I’m tired and it’s the middle of the night,' said Rallie. 'I don’t feel like trying to follow some stupid map with a dying flashlight and the compass on my phone.'

The North Star was the brightest of the Little Dipper stars and

the one at the very end of the Little Dipper’s handle. Noah thought about Tommy sings the Blade, steering his ship by the North Star, and blinked up into the night sky. You were supposed to be able to find it by looking for the Big Dipper and then use that to find the Little Dipper.

That is the Polaris, he thought. If we can see that, we cannot get lost.

'We’ll find our way.' When he spoke, he could feel Tommesings’s voice creeping into his voice, which

was strange because Tommesings was gone. 'And figure out a place to make camp.'

'Make camp?' Harper asked.

Heck, he liked trouble. 'We'll eat the provisions we brought. Look, even according to the tiny map on the bus schedule, if we just follow the river, it should take us to East Eaton. Our quest could still be completed.' 'Until the break of day.' It was exhaustion, but it was not that hard to think of what Tommesings would say. Tommy sings

always got into scrapes, so they did not bother him.

'You want us to walk?' Rallie said. 'Both of you have gone crazy.'

'My Girl, I want us to rest,' Noah replied, offering her his arm. For once, he did not feel uncertain. 'I want us to take our meager supplies and turn them into a feast. She laughed tiredly and looped her arm with his. 'Fine. But I am going to want to go home upon the morrow, so plan on that happening.'

I want us to make a fire and warm our bones. Then, in the morning, we can decide what to do from there. Should you, fair maid, wish to return home upon the morrow, then we shall entertain your arguments.'

'See, you missed the game.' Harper’s mouth lifted in a triumphant smile. 'You missed us playing. Admit it.'

Harper took a step back. Noah stopped abruptly, whirling on her, the spell broken. 'I told you not to talk about that, and you said you wouldn’t.'

His voice came out harsher than he had intended, a growl.

'Okay,' Rallie said, grabbing his shoulder and propelling him down the alley. 'So long as we are not freezing, I won’t call home. If we can make camp, get warm, and sleep for a while, then let us do that and try not to get in more trouble than we’re already in.'

'Girl Jann would be good at surviving on the streets,' Harper said innocently.

Noah glared.

'What? I was talking to Rallie, not you. I am allowed to talk to Rallie about the game, aren’t I? You didn’t make any rules about that.'

'We should keep off big roads,' Noah warned, pointing toward a narrow street up ahead. 'If someone sees us with the map and the flashlight, they’re going to guess we’re lost kids or runaways or something. We already had those people at the bus station after us.'

Rallie sighed. 'I don’t even know what you two are fighting about. You both want to stay on this crazy adventure, and that’s what we’re doing.'

'We still don’t know if they were chasing us,' Harper said. 'Maybe they wanted to apologize about the crazy guy. They were afraid we were going to miss the bus. Or maybe they were aliens trying to take our faces.'

Noah raised his eyebrows and started walking.

'Oh fine, yes, let us use the dark scary road,' Rallie said, but she followed him anyway. 'Let me see the map.'

Harper handed it over along with the flashlight. There was a strange quiet in the air, as though everyone and everything was asleep. The echo of their footsteps was the loudest sound for several blocks. It felt both eerie and exciting to Noah. It seemed to him that the entire world had become theirs for a little while.

The asphalt of the alley was cracked, and they had to be careful not to stumble as they headed down it, passing heaped mounds of garbage and the back doors of restaurants.

'There’s a stretch of woods,' Rallie said, waving the map. 'Close to the water. We’d have to cross the highway to get there, but we’re not too far.'

'Is it a lot of woods?'

'Not really. But it is a park. Like a small, protected-area park

looking out on the water, not a kid park with swings. Too small for a fire to be hidden, but probably big enough that we’re not going to be seen from the road.'

Noah nodded and let her direct them. He did not know how to make a fire anyway. It had just seemed like something that you did when you made camp, along with making stews and playing lutes and swigging from jugs of cider.

They passed a supermarket with trucks pulled up to the back- unloading flats of cardboard boxes. They passed a donut shop, closed, but with a light on inside. It gave off a warm waft of fresh dough and melting sugar. Noah’s stomach growled, and he fished a Twizzles out of the pack. In comparison to the delicious smell, the candy tasted like sweet rubber.

'This was such a terrible idea,' Rallie muttered as they walked. 'How did you convince me this was a clever

idea? This was a terrible, terrible, terrible idea.'

He dug around and took out enough to give Rallie and Harper a couple of Twizzlers each, in case they were hungry too.

'Thank you, kind sir,' said Harper, with a little bow.

Harper looked crestfallen, which was stupid because she had been needling him a minute ago about playing. He did not know why she was upset over something she started. If

she had not pointed out that he was playing, he would not have had to stop.

'I am not doing that with you,' Noah said, biting the Twizzles savagely.

'Will you two quit it?' Rallie said, aiming the beam of the flashlight at the sidewalk. She had the red candy hanging out of one side of her mouth and was chomping on it like it was a cartoon cigar.

Noah started to say something about how it was her fault that they were tired when he realized saying that

might prove her point that he was cranky.

Harper looked at her feet. 'We’re cranky because we’re tired, that’s all.'

The highway was a long stretch of lanes, with an even wider overpass, but at half-past four in the morning, they saw only a single truck, headlights lighting up the street so brightly that it almost seemed like a day.

Once it zoomed by, Polly and Rallie held hands and raced for the

median. They climbed the concrete block quickly; Noah's long legs made it easy for him to hop over. Then they ran across the lanes on the other side, even though no cars were coming from either direction.

They could still see the lights of East Rochester on one side and could just glimpse the glimmering, rippling surface of the Ohio River stretching out on the other. But after a few minutes of walking, Noah felt hidden from the road. The edge of the woods was scrubby and sloped down at a steep

angle. They tripped over sticks and uneven patches of earth. Long roping tendrils of bushes scraped at their legs.

CHAPTER EIGHT

'Well, THIS IS IT,' RALLIE SAID, SHADING THE Flashlight with her hand. 'You think we can sleep out here?'

Noah knelt. The ground was wet-the wet that seeps up and soaks through clothes. He leaned against a tree, and despair washed over him. He liked the idea of an adventure-but what

did he know about having one? He was not used to roughing it. He was not used to bugs and dirt and all the stuff soldiers and pirates had to deal with. The only time he had done anything even like camping was when set he would up his grandfather's old tent in his backyard; it had turned out to be full of spiders, and he had ripped the old canvas trying to escape from them.

Even though they were close to the highway, the branches swinging overhead and the smell of leaf mold rising from the forest floor made Noah

feel a million miles away from the world he knew. Like they were in some fantasy land where dragons flew overhead, and magic was possible.

Harper sat down on the root of a tree. 'Ugh, it’s kind of damp and cold on my butt-u-lar region. We’re going to need a hammock or something.'

Pushing away from the tree, he unzipped his backpack and pulled out his sleeping bag. It was waterproof on one side, so if he opened it fully and spread it out like a picnic blanket, it

would be big enough for all of them to sit on. Maybe keep them dry.

'That was smart, bringing that,' Rallie said, helping him to spread it out. 'All I have is a change of clothes, toothpaste, and cookies that we got from Harper’s.'

'You couldn’t sneak back into your house,' Harper reminded her, crawling onto the sleeping bag, flopping down, and rooting around in her pack. 'And I didn’t exactly give you advance notice.'

The lolling head and closed eyes combined to make the Princess look as tired as they were, which was oddly reassuring. Harper set the dollie down and smoothed out her dress, then turned back to the bag. She tugged out a thin-looking coverlet, some safety pins, and Band-Aids, a bar of chocolate that had gotten slightly mashed, a package of baby carrots, a bruised apple, a sweater, a pair of socks, a notebook, and one of her mermaid dollies.

Which, from Harper, was an apology.

She took the Princess out of her bag. The dolly's eyes were open, but as Harper leaned her one way and then another, her eyes closed. Noah was glad to see that Harper had reattached the Princess’s head, although it lolled slightly like Harper had done it in a hurry and it was not on exactly right.

'This is what I bought,' she said. 'To share if you want any.'

'We should take turns keeping watch,' Noah said, 'as we did on the bus.' He took out his jar of peanut butter, a package of crackers, oranges, and orange soda and put everything but the soda with the other supplies. Thirsty, he popped the tab on the drink. Fizzy foam bubbled up, and he quickly shifted the can over a mound of grass so the spraying liquid could spill onto the dirt. Then he took a long swig.

He thought about how he had met them both when they were all little kids. Harper had been riding her bike

up and down the block when she saw Noah sitting on his front steps, reading a beat-up old copy of James and the Giant Peach. She stopped to tell him that she had read the book and it was good, but not as good as The Witches, and had he read The Twits? She was the one who had met Rallie, too, picking her up at a carnival, where they had been the only two girls who had their faces painted like Batgirl instead of fairies, cats, and clowns. The first time the three of them had spent time together, they had dangled upside

down from the jungle gym until the blood rushed to their heads, trying to get their brains to work Bettley would that they would be able to move things with the combined power of their minds.

The bubbles hit the back of his throat satisfyingly in a satisfying way.

It seemed like such a long time ago.

'Watch? For what?' Rallie said, reaching out her hand for the soda. 'It’s not like there are going to be

marauding orcs or bears or wolves or creepy, crazy old bus riders. We’re in a tiny strip of park.'

'We’ll sleep better if someone’s on watch,' said Noah, glancing at the dolly's creepy, almost sleeping face. He wanted someone to make, sure she did not wake up and move around while their eyes were closed. 'Or I will, anyway.'

'Not me,' said Rallie, yawning.

'I’ll go second,' Noah said. 'Kick me if you get tired sooner.'

'I can stay up,' Harper said. 'How about I wake one of you in an hour?'

She nodded. He finished off his orange soda in another two gulps. Rallie had her enormous red coat off and was quickly layering her change of clothes-jeans and a Jon hoodie with cat ears on the hood-on along with the gray dress she was wearing. Then she curled up like a bug under her coat, closed her eyes, and seemed to fall instantly into slumber.

Harper had her thin blanket wrapped around her like a cape and was sitting with her back against the trunk of the tree, looking out at the water. Noah's eyes had adjusted enough to the moonlight that he could see the determined set of her jaw.

Harper's hand rested absently on the thing's chest like she was holding it still. As Noah looked, his imagination fed him a horrible image: The Princess staggering across the uneven ground toward him, her chubby arms reaching for him. He wondered if

he could convince Harper to put the Princess back in her bag. On her lap was the Princess, eyes open now as though she was on watch with Harper, staring at nothing, the bone-white of the dolly's face seeming to glow in the gloom.

Harper tilted her head, her gaze going to where he was sitting. 'What?' she whispered.

He pointed to the dollie-that was once AVA’s passed down, now with part of the soul of Nevaeh inside, and

inside the mind was the minds of the mother and the 4 girls that had her stolen, realizing he had been staring. He kept his voice low. 'This whole thing. Is it a game? Just tell me.'

She narrowed her eyes. 'It’s real, Noah.'

'Okay,' he said, too tired to fight, lying down on the open sleeping bag and pillowing his head on one arm. 'Wake me when it’s my turn to be on the watch.'

HE DREAMED ABOUT a big building near a river billowing smoke from its towers. And then, his dream vision swooping forward, he saw a yellow-haired girl watching as her father spun beautiful things from bone China. Teapots were so thin and white that they seemed to glow from inside, covered in paper-fine China roses, lilies, and leaves. Vases were so fine that it seemed like a breath would shatter them, painted with lots of real gold.

She grunted a yes. He closed his eyes.

Skylar.

At the thought of her name, she turned toward him, her large black eyes widening like she was the one who saw a ghost.

His vision seemed smeared, and he was in front of a big, drafty house, welcoming a skinny and pinch-nosed woman. He knew, without knowing how, that he was looking at Skylar’s aunt and that she had come

down from the city to take care of Skylar after Skylar's mother had died six months past and it became clear that her father had no plans to remarry.

Children break things, her aunt said, and took away the dollies her father had made for her with spare clay, telling her they were too precious for her to keep.

Children are dirty, her aunt said, and forbade her from playing outside. She gave her chores instead, making her wash the windows, sweep

the floors, and move the furniture around.

Noah watched as Skylar swept the floors, polished the blue, and hid things under her bed. Clothespins that she marked with ink, so they had eyes. A pillowcase tied with string, so it seemed like it had a neck and head. In the dark of her room at night, when her father and her aunt had gone to their beds, she took them out and played with them, whispering to herself, calling them by the same names as her old dollies.

The aunt displayed them, along with less successful bone China pieces Skylar's father brought home from the factory. There was the bone China coffeepot wound with a vine that did not curve quite right, resting on the sideboard in the dining room. There were sets of too-small teacups and a bowl with alligator feet that were too frightening, and no one liked. There were countless vases marred by mistakes, that listed a little to one side or had gold paint that had smeared or blistered before they were fired or had

three-dimensional flowers that had broken coming out of the kiln. Soon several mistakes rested on every side table, forcing Skylar to tiptoe through the parlor to avoid breaking any.

NOAH WOKE, BLINKING, to Jon sky overhead, dotted with puffs of clouds.

Sunlight filtered through the canopy of green and brown leaves, dappling the ground with bright spots and shadow. He heard a sound that reminded him of the ocean. He had

gone to stay with his grandparents one summer after his dad left, and they had stayed in a house by the beach. He had woken up with the crash of the waves in his head every morning.

But this was not the ocean, he knew, and a moment later he realized it was not the Ohio River, either. It was the sound of the highway, of cars and trucks, whooshing past the woods, that sounded like breaking surf.

Noah sat up, blinking, stretching out his stiff limbs, and

looking around him. Rallie was asleep on the sleeping bag, wrapped in her coat, braids falling in her face, a few pieces of white fuzz or feathers dusting her skin. Harper was asleep too, her head lolling back against the tree. She had fallen asleep on watch, Noah realized.

Now that it was daytime, he could see that the glass orbs were slightly too small for her eye sockets, leaving gaps in the corners. An ant crawled out from one of them, marching across her eye and up over

her forehead into the thicket of her hair. Noah sprang up and scuttled away from her, his heart racing.

Turning, he saw the Princess resting in the dirt right behind his head, far from where she had been the night before. Her black eyes were wide open, leering down at him.

There was more of the white stuff settling on the grass. It looked like snow, but then he realized what he was looking at. It was the inside of the sleeping bag. Something had ripped it,

cutting the fabric, and pulling out the lining, and scattered that, along with all their food.

Crackers were crumbled over the ground, and the chocolate bar was torn in half, pieces of gold foil scattered like confetti. He wondered who had done this and then looked over at the dolly's empty eyes, the ant on her bone-white cheek.

Baby carrots were tossed around in the dirt. The peanut butter was smeared on the bark of a nearby

tree, the jar resting against a rock as if it had rolled there.

As he stared a squirrel ran up to the open jar of peanut butter and stuck its furry body inside.

It did not seem possible that they had spent the night in a tiny stretch of woods in a town he did not know. Looking back at the night before, at Harper and Rallie waking him up in the middle of the night, the story about the Princess, the walk to the bus station, and making camp in the dark-

all those things felt distant like they had happened to someone in a book.

Turning back to where the dollie rested, outside the circle of Harper's arms, he wondered about other impossible things. Had a ghost trashed their campsite? Was Skylar watching him out of the Princess's glass eyes? A chill shivered up his spine.

Out in the middle of nowhere with an angry ghost and no idea how to get to her grave.

Oh yes, they were in trouble.

CHAPTER NINE

'Five more minutes,' she mumbled.

'Stranded in East Rochester, Pennsylvania,' Noah said with a shrug, hoping that gesture would somehow convey that he shared her feeling that everything had gotten weird.

'Rallie,' he said quietly, poking her upper arm. 'Something happened. Come on. Get up. You have to see this.'

NOAH WOKE RALLIE BY SHAKING HER SHOULDER UNTIL she groaned and rolled over. Her braids spread out on the slashed sleeping bag and more white stuffing got caught in her hair.

She opened her eyes and seemed surprised to see him there. 'Where...*?*' 'Whom...*?*'

Then, as she took in the state of their campsite, she turned back to him with her brow furrowed in further puzzlement.

He jerked his head toward Harper and then the dollie. 'Do you believe in ghosts?' he asked, keeping his voice low. 'Because I think I do now. For real and for sure.'

'It could have been raccoons,' Rallie said. Her expression grew more horrified as she looked around. 'I thought one of us was supposed to stay awake. Isn’t that what you said last night?'

'Raccoons? Really?'

Rallie nodded slowly like she was not so sure anymore. 'Or Harper did it. She was on watch.'

'She’s not crazy,' Noah said. 'And she’d have to be crazy to do this. Anyway, I thought you believed her about the ghost.'

Rallie pushed herself to her feet and walked around the woods, shivering. 'This is too much. I do not believe this. Animals ransacked the camp, or Harper was mad at us for wanting to go back and was trying to

convince us to keep going. Either way, it wasn’t a ghost.' I do- I do…

'I did. I do not know. It was fun to play along.'

Noah said, but as he said it, he realized that it still did feel like an adventure-even more than it had before-just not the same kind of adventure. He was scared. Little hairs were standing up along his arms, and he thought that Rallie was scared too. That was why she did not want to

believe in ghosts anymore. 'It seemed like an adventure last night, right?'

But Noah wanted them to be real, wanted that desperately.

If they were real, then maybe the world was big enough to have magic in it. And if there was magic-even bad magic, and Noah knew it was more likely that there was bad magic than any good kind-then maybe not everyone had to have a story like his father’s, a story like the kind all the adults he knew told, one about giving

up and growing bitter. He might have been embarrassed to wish for magic back home, but there in the woods, it seemed possible. He looked over at the cruel, glassy eyes of the dollie, so close that she could have touched his face.

He thought about what Harper had said about how if they did not go on the quest right then, they never would. How if they faltered, they had never come back.

Anything was better than no magic at all.

And he thought about his dream.

'It was Skylar,' Noah said. 'Maybe her spirit’s angry that we aren’t taking this quest seriously enough. She is mad that we got off the bus before we got to the right stop. Or maybe she’s mad that you want to go home.'

'I bet Harper got that story about Skylar and the bones from one of her library books. I am not trying to be mean. Harper makes everything more

interesting, but sometimes she gets carried away, you know?'

'I’m sticking with the raccoon explanation,' Rallie said, picking up her coat and shouldering it on over her layers.

Harper, who had been the last one awake and who wanted to convince them both to stay on the quest. Who might have thought it was funny to put the Princess so close to him, knowing it would freak him out? 'What about the ashes? Those were real. 'He thought

about that, turning the words over in his mind. Rallie was saying raccoons, but the rest of what she said pointed to Harper.

Rallie nodded, but not in a way that was agreeing. 'I keep thinking about them. She took some ash from a grill and mixed in pieces of chicken bone. It was dark when we both looked at it. People fake that kind of thing on stage all the time.'

He had just dreamed about what Harper described, like the way

that after you see a movie, you sometimes dream yourself into it. He had no way to know if any of it was true or if it was just his brain regurgitating stuff.

He remembered that he had wondered the same thing the night before, about whether it was all a trick, but somewhere along the way he had become convinced, and he did not want to give that feeling up. He wanted to tell Rallie about his dream and insist it meant that she was wrong, but he realized it did not prove anything.

'Nope,' he said. 'I don’t think so.'

Any food?'

Rallie seemed to have lost interest anyway, unzipping the front part of Noah’s backpack and sticking her hand inside, fishing around. 'Do we have anything left?

Her hand came out of his backpack, her fingers clutching a folded-up square of paper. She began to unfold it. He knew exactly what she was holding.

'What is this?' she asked, distracted by her discovery. 'A note? What is in here? Secret boy stuff?'

'Give it to me,' Noah said, grabbing the paper.

Rallie stood up, still reading, the smile sliding off her face. It was replaced with an expression of astonishment. Noah could see the scrawl of his handwriting across the page and doodles decorating the margins. 'These are the Questions

Harper gave you. You answered them. You told her you didn’t, but you did.'

'I did. Can I have them back now?' He stood too, starting toward her. He lunged forward to grab the note from her hand.

She danced out of his way. 'But why would you answer them when you were going to-?'

Rallie never got to finish because at that moment Harper jumped up from the sleeping bag with a shriek. She was crouching, blinking in the

sunlight, her hands outstretched like she was ready to fight. It was a move of surprising awesomeness.

'Harper?' Noah asked.

To his relief, Rallie folded the note twice and shoved it into the pocket of her coat, then walked over to Harper. They sat back down together. Noah could see that Harper was still breathing hard.

'I dreamed that I was Skylar. I fell-' Harper said, pressing her hands against her face.

Noah did not speak for a long moment. He wondered if he was a bad person if he did not say anything about his dream. He wondered if Rallie would think he was ridiculous if he did. The leaves overhead rustled. 'You better look around,' he said finally. 'Did she seem angry? Because it looks like something trashed our camp.'

Harper stood up and dusted herself off, going over to the Princess and lifting her. The dolly's eyes moved to half-open, which made it appear as though she was watching them, the

way his cat did when she was pretending to sleep.

'You think a ghost did this?' Harper asked finally, turning back toward them.

'It’s classic poltergeist stuff, isn’t it?' Noah asked.

'I don’t,' Rallie said. 'It was raccoons. But I thought that you’d say it was a ghost.'

'She’s not a poltergeist,' Harper said, as though Noah had suggested her brand-new box set of

Doctor Who DVDs were bootlegs. 'And why would she toss out our food? Ruin the only thing we must sleep on? She wants us to take her to East Eaton. She’s not going to make it harder for us.'

Noah thought he detected a note of uncertainty in her voice, though.

'Okay, whatever,' he said. 'You think it was raccoons too?'

Harper looked around and sucked in her breath. 'I don’t know.

What if it was Kanth Jones? What if he followed us?'

A shiver went up against Noah’s back, ending with a twitch between his shoulder blades. He could too easily imagine that weathered, smirking face watching them from the darkness. But there was no reason for Kanth to have gotten off the bus, followed them, waited for them to falls asleep, then tossed around their stuff. No reason at all. They did not have anything he wanted. He thought they

would all been grabbed by aliens and gotten their faces stolen.

But Skylar had plenty of reasons to be mad at Rallie and was frustrated that she was not already in her grave.

'Look, I want to figure out what happened as much as you do,' said Rallie, looking between them like she was not sure which side she was on just then-maybe neither of theirs. 'But can we please get out of here first? The

woods are creepy, and I have to pee and I’m hungry.'

'We passed that donut shop last night,' Noah said.

There was not much to pack up, so they did not. The sleeping bag had been ruined along with the rest of their supplies, the long gashes making puffs of white stuffing well up with every gust of wind. The best they could do was gather up everything, roll up the wounded sleeping bag, and dump it

all in one of the trash cans along the river.

Rallie nodded. 'Perfect. So long as they have a bathroom.'

No one else was there, but that did not mean that no one else had been.

They walked back along the highway and managed to find a spot to cross that was less crazy than jumping over the median. Then they walked quietly, heads bent against the chill air. Noah could smell the melting sugar and rising dough of the shop blocks before

he could see it. By the time he got to the door, he was practically drooling.

'How much money do we all have?' Harper asked.

'I’ve got fifteen dollars and fifty cents.' Noah had started with twenty-three dollars, but the bus ticket had cost him seven-fifty and it would be another seven-fifty to get back. Of the fifteen fifty he had, that left him with only eight dollars he could spend.

'I have twenty,' said Rallie.

'Eleven and a bunch of pennies,' said Harper. 'We should save something for later. For lunch and the trip back.'

There were cinnamon cider donuts, Boston cream and jelly crullers, chocolate sprinkle, rainbow sprinkle, maple cream, sour cream, old-fashioned, Juneberry, toasted coconut, bear claws, and apple fritters. And then beneath the glass of the counter, stranger flavors-Froot Loops, peanut butter, ketchup, pickle juice, mandarin orange, honeycomb, lox and cream

cheese, lobster, cheeseburger, fried chicken, wasabi, acorn flour, bubblegum, Pop Rocks, and spelled.

But as they opened the door, Noah's stomach growled, and saving money was the last thing on his mind. There were rows and rows of baskets along the back wall, each of them filled with a different flavor of the donut, their frostings bright under the lights.

The man behind the counter had a thick, wild head of black hair. It stuck up as though he had been

electrocuted, except where it crawled down his cheeks into sideburns. 'Get your kids something?' he asked as the bell on the door rang. 'The wasabi donuts just came out of the fryer. They’re still hot.'

They were also a muted green color and smelled spicy, like hot peppers.

'Uh,' Noah said, glancing at the menu. 'Can I have hot chocolate? A big one.'

He took his warm cup with its spirals of whipped cream to one of the small plastic tables. Rallie headed to the bathroom in the back while Harper ordered two more hot chocolates. They sat for a while, letting the heat of the paper cups warm their fingers.

Then they each ordered a donut. Noah got Pop Rocks, Rallie got maple cream, and Harper got Froot Loops. The crumbling cake was delicious, and there were real Pop Rocks inside that fizzed against Noah's tongue. He licked his fingers when he

was done, forgetting that he had not washed his hands in an exceptionally long time.

The hot chocolates had been two-fifty apiece and the donuts were a dollar twenty-five, costing them each three seventy-five and leaving Noah with four twenty-five that he could spend for the whole rest of the trip. Harper had even less. He hoped she had at least twenty-five pennies, or she was not going to be able to pay her bus fare home.

Harper sat the Princess on a nearby chair. The dollie slumped, her head twisted on an angle, her hair rumpled as though she had been sleeping on it. Her half-closed eyes were bright with reflected light.

'If you died,' Harper said, keeping her voice low. 'Do you think you'd want to be a ghost?'

'Get revenge by doing what?' Rallie asked, laughing. 'You would be a disembodied spirit. What are you going to do? Yell 'boo!' at them? Try to

convince them to go on a stupid road trip?'

'If I was murdered, then yes, definitely,' Noah said. 'So, I could haunt my killer and get revenge.'

'I could throw stuff around,' Noah reminded her.

'Maybe,' Rallie said. 'I'd do it if I could be me, but see-through. The entire world would be like my television. I could visit the people I loved. But not if I had to repeat the same thing repeatedly, like haunting

some stretch of road or going up and downstairs.'

'Even if you couldn’t talk to anyone?' Noah asked.

Rallie looked briefly uncomfortable. 'I’d was not there to be a ghost society with ghost friends.'

Harper pushed her hair back. 'Well, what if you decided you wanted to come back from the dead and then changed your mind, but you were stuck?'

Noah thought he had better interrupt that line of conversation. 'Would you want to be a ghost, Harper?'

'You mean like how I’m stuck here in East Rochester?' said Rallie, and then she took a big swallow of hot chocolate.

I had something important to tell him. Up there, I could see for miles-I could see the river and boats and the iceman’s truck in front of a house down the street-but I kept slipping and

catching myself on the copper gutters. And I heard this woman’s voice from behind me, whispering to me, telling me I better get inside, or she was going to make me sorry. She had a broom, and she was sticking it out the window, trying to hit me.'

She shrugged. 'I don’t know. Lingering around, whooshing past people who would never see me? It is scary to imagine things happening and me not being able to affect them. I keep thinking about the dream I had. It was like I was her-I was climbing around on

the slate tiles of the roof of this giant house, trying to keep away from the windows while I waited for my father to get home.

Noah thought about his dream of the pinch-faced woman and the big Victorian house of flawed pottery. He wanted to tell her about the dream, but he felt a little silly about it. When he had woken, it had seemed so obvious that the dream was real, that it had been given to him by their ghost. But now, in the warmth of the donut shop, after Rallie being so certain there was

no ghost, he was unsure about everything.

'Do you think that was really what happened?' Harper asked, leaning forward eagerly like there was only one possible right answer. 'Do you think she’s trying to tell us about her death? Imagine that the whole time she was in the cabinet, she was just waiting for one of us to take her out.'

Noah opened his mouth to describe his dream, but it seemed as though not telling Harper and Rallie

what had happened to his action figures or why he did not want to play made it hard to talk about other things too. It felt like everything was all mixed up together, weighing down his tongue.

The man moved behind the counter, dumping a fresh batch of peach muffins into a tissue-lined bin. 'No problem,' he called to them.

'Your blond friend sounds pretty hungry,' he said, coming out from behind the counter with a pink-glazed donut on a paper plate. He

placed it down in front of the dollie. 'Here. On the house. It is Pepto-Bismol flavored. We’re trying it out to see if it gets on the regular menu.'

'What?' Noah asked, confused.

As the man walked back into the kitchen, Noah could only stare at him. 'Did he-?' Noah whispered.

'It was just a joke,' Rallie said quickly, but she looked nervous. 'You know because we had a dollie. He was pretending it was real.'

'Because he thinks he’s being cool adult.' Rallie took another sip of her hot chocolate and then pushed it away as it had burnt her. She shuddered. Noah thought uncomfortably about what Aubrey had said on the walk home from school way back when. Somebody walks over your grave.

'Why would he do that?' Harper asked.

Your blond friend. There was something familiar about the words,

though, something that snagged in Noah’s mind. 'No, wait. Kanth. That is what he said on the bus- ‘I’m not going to talk to the blonde.’ Because he did not like the way she was looking at him. Remember?'

'I remember that' said Rallie. Harper nodded.

'Do you think he was talking about the dollie too?' Noah felt cold, and the food he had eaten churned in his stomach. He had wanted the ghost to be real, but the more real Skylar

seemed, the more scared he was. He tried not to look over at the Princess. He tried not to think about what it meant that she sounded hungry. He tried not to notice that her cheeks seemed a little rosier today like she was feeding on something other than donuts.

They had to bury her, and they had to bury her soon.

'Okay, well...' Rallie said. She checked the face of her cell phone, then took out the map. It was ripped down

the middle, but she rested it on the table, so all the streets lined up. 'It’s ten forty-three now, and the next bus isn’t until four-thirty. There’s time and all, but I have to be on that bus.'

'East Eaton isn’t that far,' said Harper. 'Noah said so last night. We could still make it. On foot... Like real adventurers.'

They were all quiet for a long moment.

'I’m going,' Harper said, picking up the dollie and cradling it in

her lap. Her cheek rested against its pale bone China brow. Its eyes seemed more open than before. Pale milk glass with a black center. 'With or without you guys.' Her voice was small, though.

Noah thought about all the food thrown around the woods, about the slashed sleeping bag. And he wondered what else a ghost could do.

Have you ever heard this one? When you drive past a cemetery, you must hold your breath. If you do not, the spirits of the newly dead can get in

your body through your mouth and possess you.

But he had already decided. He was not turning back. 'I’m still up for an adventure,' he said with a nod. 'I’m in.'

So-o I am not going to be late. Okay?' Her voice got louder, and the words came out faster as she spoke, and when she finished there was a long silence. Rallie slapped her easily on the table like she was calling a meeting to order. 'I’m not a coward. I care about

adventures too, okay? It is not that. But I need to get home by tonight or my grandmother is going to lose her mind. She is going to call the police officers. She will make sure I do not go anywhere for months, and she will remind me of what I did whenever I ask for permission to do anything for the rest of my life. Forever.

'Okay,' Harper said finally.

'So-o, look, I want to go, but I want you to promise we'll get back home today. The bus leaves here at

four-thirty, and I want you to promise we are not going to miss it. Promise that we will turn around in time if we must. Promise me that you'll get on it with me.'

'But what if we're almost there and-' Harper started.

'No way,' Rallie said. 'We still have to get to the graveyard, bury the Princess, and find the bus station before the bus from East Eaton leaves- at three forty-five. If we make it to East Eaton and there's time, great, but

remember that the bus leaves earlier from there. I'll come with you, but if it doesn't look like we'll make it, we all come back together.'

'Then I'm going to the bus station now,' Rallie said, pushing back her chair and standing. 'You and Noah can adventure by yourselves. I'm not going with you.'

Harper looked reluctant. 'I'm not going back without finishing this quest.'

'Wait,' Noah said, standing too and reaching for her. 'We started this together. We need to stay together. We can make it to East Eaton and still get home.'

'Harper,' Noah said.

Rallie folded her arms over her chest.

Noah put out his hand to pull Harper to her feet. 'We're already up. We're waiting for you.'

She sighed. 'Fine. But if we are going to make it by Rallie's deadline,

we must go now. And we have to go fast.'

Harper stood without letting him help, holding the Princess under her arm. 'You believe me now, don’t you? About the dream. About the ghost. You believe me, right?'

Noah opened his mouth to tell her that he had dreamed about Skylar too. But just then, Rallie said, 'Sure we do,' and the moment passed.

The frosting was sickly sweet, but it was the bitter taste underneath that stayed on his tongue.

Instead, he picked up the Pepto-Bismol donut and bit into it.

CHAPTER TEN

First, he had pictured himself with a loyal steed that would have done most of the walking, so he had not anticipated the blister forming on his left heel or the tiny pebble that seemed to have worked its way under his sock so that even when he stripped off his

sneaker, he could not find it.

ADVENTURING TURNED OUT TO BE BORING. NOAH thought back to all the fantasy books he had read where a team of questers traveled overland and realized a few things.

He had not thought about how hot the sun would be either. When he put together his bunch of provisions, he never thought about bringing sunblock. Aragorn never wore sunblock. Sam never wore sunblock. Percy never wore sunblock. But despite all that precedent for going without, he was sure his nose

would be lobster-red the next time he looked in the mirror.

He was thirsty, too, something that happened a lot in books, but his dry throat bothered him more than it had ever seemed to bother any character.

And, unlike in books where random brigands and monsters jumped out just when things got unbearably dull, there was nothing to fight except for clouds of gnats, several of which

Noah was sure he’d accidentally swallowed.

Also, it was not like they were walking through the awesome vistas of Middle Earth-a Forest full of Ent's or elves, a mountain pass brimming with orcs, and ice-they were mostly walking past industrial buildings and a bowling alley. Eventually, the warehouses thinned out until it was just highway on one side and water on the other. They kept heading along the road, pausing occasionally to kick rocks or adjust their backpacks.

Rallie was walking ahead, with Noah behind her. She had a blade of grass and was trying to turn it into a whistle, a trick she claimed her uncle could do. So far all she had managed was to make a lot of spitting noises.

'I had an idea,' Harper said, speeding her pace to draw even with Noah. She was still carrying the Princess, the dollie settled against her hip like it was a child. He tried to keep his gaze from going to it. 'About Tommesings. About whom his father is.'

'You promised not to talk about the game.' He was tempted to, though. He wanted to know how the story would have ended since he would never get to play it. And he was bored.

'No,' Harper said with a trickster’s smile. 'I agreed not to ask why you stopped playing. And I didn’t.'

Noah sighed. He was arguing because he thought he should, not because his heart was really in it. 'I had some ideas too,' he admitted.

Harper looked at him with astonishment. 'You did?'

'He’s my character, after all. But even if his father is the king of the whole Gray Country, he is going to stay a pirate. He is happy where he is, on the Neptune’s Pearl. No dad is going to change that.'

Harper was looking at him oddly like she wanted desperately to ask why he thought about any of this stuff since he had said he did not want to play anymore. But for once, she was

smart and did not. 'Even if his father was the Jon of Deep winter Barrow?'

They did not have a dollie to represent him, but Jon was a bad guy, through and through. They had loved making up his crimes. He had been raising a zombie army of broken dollies to march over the rest of the lands. He had chopped off the heads of his enemies and abducted an evil priestess to be his duchess. Another action figure that Noah used to play had fought them over by the Blue Hills and nearly died. He was being healed by one of Rallie’s

dollies, in a temple, she had made from a shoebox.

'That would be fairly good,' Noah said.

Harper looked flustered. She was good at making up stories, but she was not always good at accepting the stuff he and Rallie made up, no matter how awesome it was. It took her a little while to accept a universe she did not have total control over.

'If Tommesings was Jon’s son, then he could get close enough to

assassinated him. Or he could say that he was Jon’s son-he is someone else’s kid entirely. Someone even better. Like an ancient pirate lord or monster.'

Rallie halted abruptly.

The path had ended. Up ahead, another big fat river flowed into Ohio, making it impossible to go farther. Two bridges spanned the river, but he could see that they were useless to three kids on foot. One was a railway bridge, rusted and abandoned, with large gaps where metal rails had fallen off. The

other was a massive concrete three-lane highway, with a toll booth on one side and no room for walking on the shoulder.

'Well, that’s that,' Rallie said. She had a strange expression on her face, half relief, and half disappointment.

If this were a book or a movie, they would meet a mysterious figure with a boat and that person would ferry them across. Like Charon. Probably try to trick them too-but if they were

clever, they could make it. And if he were Tommy sings, he would not need to be ferried across because he would have the Neptune’s Pearl-his two-masted schooner-and all his crew. Noah sighed, gazing up along the waterway. There were shabby-looking marinas on either side of the big unknown river.

But in real life, those things did not matter. He was suddenly aware of how tired he was.

'Let us go ask,' Harper said. 'Maybe there’s a ferry?'

It was only a little afternoon, so they walked down to the marina. The few buildings-an oversized boat storage area, a lean-to, and an office-sat beside three long docks, with an array of boats separated by berms. Two little kids were leaning over the side of piling with a fishing net, watching something in the water.

'You want to split up?' Noah asked. 'See if we can find somebody who might know how to cross?'

'Okay,' said Rallie, glancing toward the office. 'Let us meet back here in five minutes.'

'I’m going to talk to those kids,' Harper said, turning to head in their direction.

As he wandered, he spotted an old rowboat, pulled up to one side of the dry dock, and leaned against some pilings. The paint was chipped along the sides, and he did not see any oars, but for a moment, he imagined them ferrying themselves across. As he got

closer, though, he saw the hull had enough rot damage to keep it from being seaworthy. He did not need to know much about boats to know it would leak like crazy if he put it in the water.

He walked a little way, inhaling the smell of diesel and river and tar baking in the sun. The day had turned warm, and Noah wondered if it would be possible to swim across. He wondered if Rallie had had the right idea, going into the main building.

There was air-conditioning and even a water fountain up there.

Despite reading tons about pirates and drawing the Neptune's Pearl in such detail that he had figured out most of the rigging, and even building model ships, Noah had never been on a boat.

With a sigh, he studied the sleek motorboats, shaped like long cigars, and the towering, multilevel fishing vessels with tall antennae shooting off them like whiskers on a

cat. He could not imagine the sort of people who owned boats like that, but he was sure that they did not give kids rides just for asking.

He took another look at the rowboat and wondered if it might be possible to patch it. He could find some nails and wood glue and tar. And if that did not work, then maybe they could boil water faster than the boat could sink?

'Noah!'

He turned at the sound of his name being shouted. Harper was standing next to the two kids with the net and waving him over.

'Brian’s dad is trying to sell a dinghy,' she said when Noah stepped onto the dock. It dipped underneath him, and he steadied himself, lamenting his lack of sea legs.

'Uh-huh,' he said warily. They had fifteen dollars before they were dipping into the funds for the way back. 'How much does he want for it?'

'Twenty-five.' Harper glanced at Noah’s watch and raised her eyebrows. 'But Brian said that maybe we could trade if we had anything he wanted. And he’ll throw in oars.'

'There’s no other way across?'

She shook her head, making her red hair flying around her. The sun had pinned her nose and deepened her freckles. 'There’s another bridge, but it’s more than a mile away. If we are on the water, Brian says we can make it to East Eaton in a half hour. Easy.'

Brian nodded. 'We go up that way to fish sometimes. It’s not far,' the other kid said.

'Okay,' Noah said. 'Let us see this thing.'

Brian pointed to the one on the end, painted a slate gray. It was beat-up, but afloat, with no visible leaks. A lot better than the rotted-out one Noah had found near the dry dock.

Brian led them down to the end of the dock, where a few small dinghies and rowboats were moored. Three

rowboats rocked gently beside one another, buffered by plastic fenders.

'Can you give us a second to talk it over?' Noah asked.

Brian shrugged and headed back to where his friend was taking control of the net, trailing it through the water like he was going to catch something by sheer accident. As Noah watched the kid go, he saw Rallie crossing the gravel-covered yard toward them.

Her coat was tied around her waist. She looked determined and sweaty and a little bit hopeful. Her angular face and thin eyebrows were utterly familiar, but he realized for the first time that she looked like one of those older, mysterious girls he wondered at sometimes in the mall, and that made her strange to him.

It was interesting watching her when she did not notice herself being observed.

'I'll trade that, though.'

'All I’ve got is a necklace,' Harper said, touching the thin blue chain around her neck protectively. She wore a tiny typewriter key charm on it. He had not seen her without it since she had gotten it from her father on her birthday.

'I’ve got my watch and a flashlight,' Noah said. 'And a book I’m fairly sure they don’t want.'

I know you’re going to be mad, but he said it was impossible, Harper.' She sighed. 'I’m sorry.' Rallie walked

up to them, pushing back her braids impatiently. 'Hey, look, guys, I talked to an old guy up at the marina office. He said there was no way to walk to East Eaton.

'What if we don’t go on foot?' Harper said, pointing to the grayish boat.

'Do we even know which way the current of the river runs?' Rallie asked. 'Or anything about boats?'

Noah itched to be on the water, even in the little dinghy.

Harper looked momentarily thrown, then she frowned. 'What’s to know? We just row harder if the current is against us.'

'You promised we’d go back,' Rallie said. 'Both of you said that if we couldn’t get to East Eaton in time to get the bus, we’d go back to East Rochester. Well, it’s time to turn around.'

'Seriously?' Rallie asked them. 'You’re going to break your promises?'

Harper hesitated, and Noah stayed silent far too long.

'It’s not that,' Noah said, looking longingly at the water. 'It’s just that I think we can still make it.'

'Yes?' he said, trying to sound like he did not care-like he did not even know what she was going to threaten him with. He did know, though, and he did care.

Rallie’s expression hardened into a tight, unfriendly smile. Her eyes shone like chips of glass. 'Oh no, you

have to come back with me,' she told Noah. 'Even if Harper doesn’t come with us.' 'Tell me?' Harper asked. 'Wait, what do you mean? Tell me what?'

'I’ll tell her,' Rallie said. 'That you lied, and what you lied about.'

'Nothing,' Noah said, stepping back from them. He took a deep breath of diesel and river muck. He could not think-all he knew was that if Harper found out about the Questions, she would never stop picking at his reasons for lying about them until the whole

story came out. Imagining that filled him with nameless panic. 'Rallie is right about us promising. If she wants to go back, then-.'

He remembered, too late, how much Harper hated her friends keeping secrets from her.

Harper interrupted him, looking at Noah like if she stared hard enough, she could read his mind. 'What don’t you want me to find out?'

'It’s nothing,' Noah insisted.

'Then tell me,' Harper said. She hesitated a moment, then looked at Rallie. 'Tell me.'

'No way,' said Harper. 'I could tell Noah something that I bet you don’t want him to know, Rallie. I know a secret too.'

'Come on,' Rallie said. 'Give up. The game’s over. We are going back. Let us all just go back. It was still fun. It was still a quest.'

Maybe Rallie had talked about how much she hated him or said that

he smelled or how stupid he was. She had made fun of him to Harper, snickering behind his back.

Rallie's whole face changed. He wondered if he had been so transparent if it had been as clear when he had figured out just what he had to lose. And he understood, right then, why Harper was so upset about Noah and Rallie not telling Harper things. Because whatever Rallie did not want Harper to say had to be bad.

'You wouldn’t do that,' Rallie said, her voice hushed. 'You’re my best friend. That’s a secret.'

'Just tell me,' Noah said. 'Come on. Whatever it is, I will not be mad. At least I don’t think I’ll be mad.'

Harper laughed, and Noah thought he saw a strange dancing light in the glass eyes of the dollie, as though the Princess was laughing too. When Harper spoke, her voice was different. 'She’s not going to tell you. I win at blackmail. Rallie must come, and since

you must do what she wants, you must come too. So come on, let us buy this boat.' She could be mean sometimes, but never did she seem gleeful about being cruel.

'I don’t care. You didn’t care about me, and now I don’t care about you either,' said Harper.

'You don’t understand how much trouble I’m going to get in,' Rallie said, running her fingers through her braids.

'But you promised!' Rallie said, her voice anguished.

'I don’t care,' Harper repeated.

Noah paced down the dock, too angry at everyone to be ready to give in to anyone, especially those kids with their fishing net who were going to try and talk him out of all the cash they had. And he looked back at the three rowboats and the dinghy, which, now, under his resentful gaze, looked increasingly shabby. He glanced at

Rallie, who was staring at the water in an agony of indecision.

None of it was right. This was not how their quest was supposed to go.

He had read lots of stories where heroes succeeded despite long odds, where they accomplished a task that everyone else had failed. He wondered for the first time about all the people who had gone before those heroes, about whether they had been heroic too or whether they had been at

each other’s throats before everything had gone wrong.

At the very end of the dock, Noah stopped. He drew in his breath.

He wondered if there was a point where they realized they were not going to make it, were not going to beat those long odds-that in the legend that would follow, they were going to be the nameless people that failed.

In front of him was a tiny sailboat, low and slim, only a little bigger than the dinghy, but made from

fiberglass. A black-and-white striped sail was folded loosely around the boom, the symbol of a sunfish visible on the Dacron cloth. Someone must have just left it, intending to come right back, because the centerboard was pulled out and there were two life jackets piled together in the cockpit.

Across the stern was one word in a curling script: PEARL.

Noah jumped down onto the hull, his sneakers hitting the curved deck. The boat rocked wildly

underneath him, and he had to pinwheel his arms and grab the mast to steady himself. With a grin breaking across his face, he looked up at Rallie and Harper.

'We’re not buying anything,' he said. 'We’re pirates, remember?'

Their twin expressions of disbelief only made his smile wider.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The boat rocked lightly. When her foot touched the edge of the deck, though, it tipped dangerously toward

her. Noah threw his weight hard to the other side, hoping to balance it out. Harper staggered, falling on her knees with a yelp. After a few moments of wobbling, the boat settled. HARPER NEARLY CAPSIZED THE BOAT GETTING INTO IT. Noah sat in the center, fingers splayed against the hull, with his legs in the shallow cockpit as she climbed down rungs drilled into one of the pilings. First, she handed him her backpack, which he dumped next to his, in a small cavity under the centerboard.

'You’re next,' Noah called up to Rallie. 'If Harper goes to the prow and I stay in the center, it won’t be as hard for you to come aboard. At least I think it won’t be hard.'

'Wow,' she said, trailing her fingers through the water and lifting them like it was marvelous to be so close to the river and not swimming in it. 'We’re doing this thing.'

'Let me cast off the lines first,' Rallie said, beginning to untie the boat from the pilings.

'I don’t know if that’s such a clever idea,' Noah said. 'We can untie them from here and leave the ropes.'

Starboard was to the right and port was to the left. The boom was the other metal part that the sail attached to, making the L shape that swung the sail where it was supposed to be to catch the wind. And the rudder was the part that you steered with. But that was just vocabulary, and none of it would help him at all if he could not recall the principles.

Noah tried to remember everything he had ever read about sailing, which was a lot. The prow was the point of the boat and the aft was the back end-he was sure about that. And the stern was another word for the back end. The mast was the important thing sticking up from the center of the boat.

Rallie put her hand on her hip. 'What if we have to dock in East Eaton? We can’t dock without a rope.'

At first, the Pearl swung closer to the piling, one of the boat's fenders bumping against the floats holding up the dock. But while Rallie scampered down the piling, the Pearl began to drift away from the dock.

He could not argue with that, but he could worry as the boat, no longer held by a line at its bow, began to angle more sharply in its berth. Then Rallie untied the aft line.

In books, Noah remembered, there was pole that you used to cast off,

hooking on to the dock to hold the boat in place once the ropes were released, and pushing off with the pole when everyone was on. He did not have anything like that. He scrambled to grab hold of piling, but it was too late.

'Jump!' Noah yelled to Rallie. 'Now!'

They were moving. They had pirated a boat.

And she did. She pushed herself off the piling and half fell into the cockpit, making Noah must crouch

low to keep his balance. The boat sat lower in the river with a third person weighing it down, water sloshing up over the edges of the hull, but it did not tip over. As Noah pushed off the far piling that marked the outer edge of the berth, he realized that they had done it.

For better or for worse, they were on Beaver River, the current swinging them toward Ohio. The wind overhead gusted with the promise of good sailing.

And although Rallie had not even wanted to come, she was laughing. You just let out the sail-Noah remembered that term and that it involved letting the sail billow, which must be done with one of the three ropes attached to the deck, although he was not exactly sure which one-and the sail filled with lots of air, which propelled the boat straightforward.

Sailing was supposed to be simple, so long as the wind was right behind you.

At least that was how all the books said it was supposed to work. But reading about it and doing it were completely different. He understood the theory, the ropes, the figuring out the wind, and the positioning yourself on the boat, but he could not seem to make the Sunfish sail. They sat in the water, pushed around by the current, spinning slowly.

But if the wind was coming from the side-which it usually was-then things was harder. You still caught the wind, but because of the keel on the

bottom of the boat, instead of just moving away from where the wind was blowing, you mostly went straight. Mostly.

Harper was strapping herself into one of the life vests, while Noah flailed around, overwhelmed, pretending to know what he was doing, pulling on ropes, and testing things out. She offered the other vest to Rallie, who took it grudgingly. Although Rallie seemed to have accepted that they were continuing the quest, she had not come close to forgiving Harper. It was

a very tiny boat, but Rallie managed to sit as far from Harper as was possible.

Noah wanted to say something to them, to make them talk to each other, but it was hard to concentrate on that while he was pulling on lines to lift the sail. They were coming up on the two bridges. The first one was high enough not to present much of a problem, but the second had more pylons underneath it, and Noah wanted to be sure they steered wide of those.

He suddenly remembered that he had not dropped the rudder. Crawling to the stern of the boat, he pushed it down and grabbed the tiller so he could start to steer. Rallie started working on the sail. It billowed wildly, flapping back and forth, the boom swinging to the right.

'Tighten it,' he yelled, and she did, pulling the rope until the wrinkles went out of the sail. And suddenly they were moving. Spray splashed up off the water and wet their hair and faces like

raindrops. The wind ruffled Noah's hair.

Starboard, some part of his brain reminded him.

Despite the fear of Harper finding out about the Questions and the weirdness of Harper and Rallie having some secret, at that moment he felt happy. He loved the feeling of the river beneath them and ahead of them and behind them. He was the captain of a real ship; a real ship called the Pearl. It was too much magic to bear, but for

once he did not question it. He threw back his head and grinned up into the Jon of the sky.

'We’re going to flip!' Harper yelled. On either side the banks were green, occasionally punctuated with oil tanks and industrial buildings and a few stretches of houses. Rallie let out the sail more, and the boat sped, tilting starboard, the port side rising and making them lean against it with their feet balanced against the edge of the cockpit, trying to flatten things out.

They were cutting through the water, faster and faster.

'Hold on,' said Rallie.

Harper scrambled into the cockpit and got the Princess from her pack, zipping the dollie beneath her hoodie. 'In case we flip,' she said. 'I’m afraid of her going overboard.'

Noah pushed the tiller so that they moved to the left, and they slowed a little, flattening. The sail began to luff, flapping noisily, and Rallie tightened it to their new, slower speed.

That had been exhilarating but also scary.

'Obviously, I don’t,' Harper told him.

'Don’t you think she’d be safer where she was?' Noah asked.

It took a while to get used to what made the boat move faster when to let out the sailor tighten it, what to do when the wind changed slightly (which it seemed to do every ten minutes), and how to stay out of the way of other boats.

Rallie raised both her eyebrows as if to remind Noah that Harper was crazy.

They sailed for what seemed like hours but was only a single hour. Usually, when Noah was doing something, even walking, he could kind of zone out and think about other things. But handling the boat was like playing basketball-it demanded every bit of his attention. Maybe if he had been more experienced at it, things would have been different, but half the time he was terrified that the boat was

going to topple over because it was zooming along at such a steep angle. The other half of the time, the sail hung slack, and he barely could get it to move.

'Do you think Pearl’s owner has noticed their boat’s gone?' Harper asked as they passed a rocky island rising on the right-hand curve of the river. A few scrub trees grew on it.

Occasionally, a massive barge would pass by, sending a wake that forced them to grip on to anything they

could as the sailboat careened from side to side, nearly throwing them off like a bull at a rodeo.

Noah shifted uncomfortably. When he had played Tommy sings the Blade robbing people, he was always able to find a good excuse-mostly that that was bad guys-but in real life, excuses felt different. 'When we dock in East Eaton, we'll call the marina and tell them where the Pearl is. The owners will be able to pick up the boat, so hopefully, they won't worry for too long.'

Rallie pointed to the island, clearly not listening to Noah and Harper. 'It seems like anything could be there, doesn’t it? I bet no one has ever stepped foot on the shore. Imagine if there was a gateway next to one of those rocks and no one knew it because everything that goes there disappears.'

Noah looked at the island as they sailed past, imagining.

Around the curve was an industrialized stretch of river with houses along the eastern shore and

pipes, tanks, and barges along with the other. Many were docked, and a few powerboats raced between them, making the water choppy. The constant rocking of the boat made it hard to steer. Noah’s muscles were sore from leaning hard in one direction, and his clothes were soaked through with spray.

Rallie checked her phone.

'What time is it?' Noah asked her.

'About two forty,' she said. 'We've got an hour to get there and find the bus station.'

Harper looked over nervously. Even though this had started as her plan, Noah thought that she looked as worried as the rest of them.

'This is taking longer than we thought,' Harper said finally. 'Longer than those boys said.' He and Rallie had gotten good at sailing the little boat. They were going faster, catching the

wind, and skimming through the water like a bike speeding downhill.

Noah was tempted to point out that it would have taken a lot longer if they were rowing, but he did not. Even though they did not have much time, he was still feeling pleased.

Noah leaned back and watched the shoreline, watched the woods turn to town and highway, and then back to woods again, watched the few houses built close enough to the river that he could spot them. In other places,

houses on the river would have been big estates with their private docks and vast lawns, but there were regular houses like it was no big deal to live on the water.

The city beyond them reminded him a little of a more sprawling version of his town-a couple of nice Victorian houses with boarded-up windows and a sluggish central square. There was a small metal bridge, which the boat was about to pass beneath. He could hear the rattle of cars across its metal

supports. Up ahead, the river curved south.

Then they passed more industrial buildings, these a lot older looking, with crumbling chimneys reaching into the sky.

'Wait,' Harper said, pointing back at the town they had just passed. 'You've got to turn around. That is East Eaton. That is the old pottery factory. Look.'

Noah half stood; he was so surprised. 'Turn around? Do you

understand that the current is running the way we have been sailing? And the wind-if we turn about, we’re going against the wind.'

'But we’ve got to go back.' Harper’s eyes were wide. 'We missed it.'

'Okay,' he said. 'So, you swing the boom, and I’ll pull the tiller.'

He looked at Rallie and he could see the blank terror in her face. She had no more idea how to turn a sailboat around than he did.

Rallie nodded. Noah steered toward the sandy bank to give them plenty of room to come about. 'When the sail shifts, we’re going to have to change sides too,' he told Harper. 'So, get ready.'

The water was shockingly cold, and the impact of it rattled him down to his bones. He grabbed the side of the boat.

He pulled on the tiller, and Rallie pulled in the rope so that the sail tightened and swung. The boat turned

in a single graceful movement, and then, with the wind and the current coming at them the wrong way and almost no idea what they were doing, the boat listed to one side and went over, dumping them all into the river.

Rallie sputtered to the surface. Harper was treading water, holding on to the mast and the sail.

Noah swam to the keel, which rose from the hull like a shark’s fin. 'Get clear for a second.'

Noah threw his weight against the hull, and it righted itself, its sail lifting off the water. He scrambled to pull himself on board.

Harper kicked away from the boat, dogpaddling toward Rallie.

Rallie lunged at Harper. 'This is enough. The end. Enough with the creepy dollie and the lying and the trying to make this true.' With those words, her hand darted out and snatched the dollie from where it was half zipped inside Harper’s wet hoodie.

Rallie heaved herself onto the deck, and then both grabbed for Harper, who kept one arm pressed across her chest to hold the dollie in place even as she was hauled onto the boat. Another barge was passing to their left, creating a rippling wake that made their boat rock wildly again. And Noah could see that two barges followed it. For a moment they just drifted farther in the wrong direction, sail slack, holding on.

Harper screeched, and Noah gasped, but it was too late. Rallie threw

it overhand, up, and out toward the barge and the deep water.

Everything froze for a long moment. The Princess hit the waves with barely a splash, the water seeming to soak her dress in slow motion, drawing it down. Her hair spread in a golden wave, and her dull black eyes looked up at them as she bobbed for a moment before sinking in a froth of bubbles.

CHAPTER TWELVE

NOAH DIDN’T THINK ABOUT IT, THE DOVE.

He kicked now, over, and over, toward the Princess, reaching for her, opening his eyes in the murky brown river.

When he was a little kid, his mom had taken him to swimming classes at the YMCA. He remembered the bleachy smell of the chlorine and the feel of the orange swimming inflated too tightly against his upper arms and the way all the kids’ shouting

bounced off the ceiling to echo. And he remembered how to kick like a frog.

His fingers closed on a scrap of her dress. Striking his other hand out hard, he caught her arm and hauled her to him. For a moment, the cold deadweight of her small China body seemed warm against his. Before he could think too much about that, he was swimming toward the surface. His head broke through the waves, and he sucked in a grateful lungful of air.

His whole body was shaking with cold. His teeth chattered. His toes had gone numb. Behind him, Harper and Rallie were fighting, but it was hard to focus on their words.

The sailboat was at a strange angle, closer to shore. The waves had carried it to shallower water, where the keel caught in the mud. The Pearl had run aground.

Then the wake of the barge hit, the waves sending him under again,

this time without him holding his breath. He came up choking.

They were shouting at each other, but Noah did not pay attention. The water was too cold, and it took too much energy for him to do anything but put his head down and swim.

The girls were wading through the shallow water.

He kicked and kicked and kicked.

Harper was sitting on a fallen tree trunk, looking bedraggled and

miserable. Her lips were Jon with cold. Rallie had sloughed off her coat somewhere and had her arms around herself like she was trying to physically restrain herself from shivering.

Clutching the Princess to his chest, leaving only a single free arm with which to paddle, reaching the shore seemed to take forever. And when he finally got there, the bank of the Ohio River was muddy, sucking at his feet, making wading ashore even harder than swimming had been.

'The backpacks are gone,' Rallie said. 'They must have fallen out when the boat rolled the first time.'

He had not even thought about it. He did not even remember deciding. He had just known that if he did not, he would lose something he was not ready to give up.

Noah sank on the sandy, muddy bank and looked at the dollie in his arms. The Princess’s dress was torn, and it seemed ready to disintegrate further as it dried. One of

her arms had been pulled free from the socket and was hanging limply from a dirty string. He stared down at her and wondered why he had been willing to jump back into a freezing river to get her.

'What time is it?' Rallie asked. 'My phone’s dead.'

He looked at his watch. The center of the crystal face had fogged up, but even if it had stopped, it could not be too far off. 'Three twenty.'

'We’ve got to get moving,' Rallie said, clearly panicked. 'Get up. We’ve got to go.'

As the Princess’s dull black eyes rolled up at him, he remembered what Harper had said about breathing in the dead. Maybe when he had opened her bag of ashes, he had inhaled some by accident. And if that were true, then maybe she could possess him anytime she wanted, just like the dead people who possessed you when you passed by graveyards. He

wanted to drop her on the riverbank, but his hands would not obey him.

Noah’s feet felt like they were filled with lead. 'Rallie...' We are not going to make it, he wanted to tell her. There is no way. We do not even know where we are going. But he could see in her face that she already knew all those things. That she had figured them out on the boat before she had hurled the Princess into the waves.

Rallie walked with determination, and although Noah was

not sure she knew where she was going, he and Harper followed her.

'How could you-?' Harper said to her but then bit off the end of the sentence as Rallie stalked off. Harper pulled the dollie from Noah’s hands silently. He let her take it.

They stumbled through the woods and then along the side of an empty stretch of road, past a raggedy wire fence that looked like it was keeping zombies back after an apocalypse rather than cows. As they

tripped over rocks and stumps, wet hair sticking to their faces and necks, soaked socks squelching in their shoes, the silence stretched between them, making him even more panicked. Noah kept looking at his watch, which was not running entirely right anymore but still seemed to be ticking along faster than he wanted.

At three fifty-four, when the bus was well and truly gone, she whirled on Harper.

They were all shivering. Rallie kept asking what time it was in a smaller and smaller voice. At three-thirty, she kept marching with grim determination. At three thirty-four, she sped up to a near run. At three thirty-seven, she started to cry, quietly and to herself. He reached out a hand toward her, but she gave him such a terrible look that he pulled back and let her alone. At three forty-three, she set her jaw and kept going.

'I thought maybe if she were gone, you'd go back to normal,' Rallie

said. 'I know you’re just making all this up. Stop acting like it is so important like you believe in it. You have Noah fooled, but you don’t fool me.'

'You promised this wouldn’t happen!' she shouted. 'You promised, and then you broke your promises repeatedly, and now my whole life is going to be ruined because of you!'

'You never cared about the quest!' Harper shouted back. 'You threw Skylar into the water. You threw her away like she was garbage.'

'I don’t-'

'Is that what you’re mad about? About Noah?'

Harper whirled on Noah. 'She looooves you. That is her big secret. She wants you to be her boyfriend and go to the movies with her and make kissy faces. That’s the only reason she even came with us.'

Noah took a step back, glancing over at Rallie, expecting her to deny it.

And it did not matter anyway. They were all cold and miserable, and he had to do something before the fight they had been having all along bubbled over into something so bad that it could not be taken back.

Her trembling hands went to cover her face. She and Harper were both shivering as hard as he was. But she did not deny anything, and he did not have room in his brain to know how to process that. He felt a little embarrassed and a lot shocked.

Now I know why Noah is sick of you. He answered those Questions you gave him; you know. He cares about the game, even if he is lying about it. He still wants to play. He just does not want to play with you anymore. And you know what? I do not either. He hates you, and I hate you too.'

'Rallie-' he started, not sure what he was going to say, but hoping he would figure it out as he spoke.

She shook her head, keeping her eyes on Harper. 'Of course, you would say that. You are horrible.

Then, as Harper stared at her, stunned, her skin flushed in that blotchy way it got, Rallie turned and ran from both. She pushed her way into the tangled brush of the woods.

'I don’t hate you,' Noah told Harper. He hesitated a moment and then raced after Rallie.

He had been hurt and mad and afraid of letting anyone see how he felt.

But he had thought they would go on being Harper and Rallie, playing the same game, being best friends, sleeping over at each other's houses.

He knew he had been the bad friend, the liar, the one that had started everybody fighting.

He had taken it for granted that he would be able to go back to being friends later if he wanted, and everything would be the way he had left it. He had counted on that.

It did not take long to find Rallie. She was sitting with her back against a tree, head tipped forward so that her wet braids hung in her face. He thought that she had been crying again, but he was not sure. The skin around her eyes was red and swollen.

But he had messed up everything.

'You didn’t have to go looking for me,' she said.

He went over and sat beside her. 'Why did you say all that stuff?'

'You were really good on the boat. At sailing.' Which sounded lame now that he heard the words aloud, although it had made sense in his head.

She shook her head, not looking up. 'I don’t know.'

Noah had no idea how to make things better. He wanted to ask her if it was true that she liked him, but he did not want to make her more upset-and since she had gotten pretty upset already, it was true. But he was not sure why she had been willing to follow

Harper onto the boat just to keep Noah from finding out. It was not an insult or anything. It was kind of a compliment.

She shrugged.

Noah had not thought about asking a girl out in any tangible way, but if he were going to ask a girl out to get pizza or play video games, he would want her to be like Rallie.

The silence stretched until, unexpectedly, she broke it. 'It was fun.' She smiled lopsidedly. 'Sailing. Even if

we capsized. And I can’t believe you stole that boat.'

She did not reply, and he did not want another moment of awkwardness. He gathered his courage. 'I’m sorry about everything. We should have gone back before. You were right. I’ll tell your grandmother it was all our fault.'

'We’ll call the marina,' he said, only a little defensively. 'So, it’ll only be stolen for a little while.' 'It doesn’t matter. That’s not even what I’m really

mad about.' Rallie leaned her head against the tree. 'I mean, I am, but there’s more.'

He waited, unsure of what she was going to say next.

Noah nodded... 'There was all that stuff with the donut guy and the crazy bus guy seeming to see her, and there was the camp getting messed up, and-and I had a dream about Skylar last night in the woods. Just like Harper. It wasn’t the same dream, but it was kind of the same.'

'Do you think there’s a ghost that talks to Harper?' Rallie asked. 'I’m not asking if you believe in ghosts. I’m asking if you believe in this ghost.'

'You did...?' Rallie did not look happy to hear it.

'I should have said something before,' he told her.

'It’s just-' Rallie looked down at her hands. She clenched them. 'I don’t want to believe in Skylar. I don’t want there to be a ghost that’s talking to Harper-and now, to you.'

'You can’t be jealous-'

She cut him off, talking amazingly fast. 'You don’t understand. There cannot be a ghost, a real ghost. Because if there is, then some random dead girl wants to haunt Harper, but my dead parents can’t be bothered to come back and haunt me.'

Rallie wiped her eyes with the back of one hand. They were wet and glittering with all the tears she was holding back. 'What if we bury the Princess and Skylar is gone? What if we

put her to rest? What if it is real? Does that mean that my parents did not even care enough to say goodbye? I did not even get a single stupid dream. Not one.' He felt like a jerk for not even considering it. Now that he had, he was not sure there was anything he could say to Rallie that would not make him a bigger jerk. He was helpless.

Everything seemed to pause, as though the universe had taken a moment to draw its breath.

He remembered Rallie's parents only vaguely. He recalled sitting on a linoleum floor, playing Matchbox cars with Rallie in a sunny yellow kitchen while her mother made them toast with jam, her father wearing crazy ties to his job at the courthouse- and, of course, Noah remembered that they had died. But he did not think of them as dead, the way ghosts were dead. And he had never thought about how it would be to go on a quest to dig a grave when your parents were already in one.

'Maybe after we die, we don’t get choices like that.' He crouched down next to her. 'And it probably sucks to be a ghost.'

Snapping twigs made them both lookups. Noah stood. Harper was walking toward them, wearing an uncomfortable expression, half relief, and half dismay.

'I found the way to town,' she said.

Rallie snorted, the corner of her mouth lifting. 'Maybe,' she said.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Noah and Harper and Rallie walked past him, still trailing water, their shoes making squelching sounds. Harper hugged the Princess to her chest, the dolly's face turned so that he could not see if her cheeks had grown even rosier. Next, they passed a gaming store with a few bikes leaned against the pavement and a couple more chained to a nearby STOP sign. And finally, they came to a diner, the only restaurant they had seen that was open.

They stopped to gaze at the menu on the door.

'I have four dollars and twenty-five cents-aside from the bus fare home,' Noah said. 'How much do you guys have?'

ALTHOUGH THE MAIN STREET OF EAST EATON was full of big store windows and shops, many were no longer open at all. There was a place called Pants Unlimited that was covered in flyers advertising FINAL SALE! on everything since they were

going out of business, but by the aged look of the flyers, they might have been going out of business for years. The store owner stood in the doorway, smoking a cigarette.

'That I can spend?' said Harper. 'Zero.'

'Eight seventy-five,' said Rallie, pushing up her dress to rifle through the pockets of the jeans she had on underneath.

'So, not much before we start dipping into our bus fare home,' Harper said... 'But something...'

Rallie looked grim at the mention of the bus, but did not say anything, which was good, but also made Noah nervous. From the woods, the three of them had only said things having to do with figuring out where they were going. He could not decide if the girls did not want to fight anymore or if they were gearing up for an even bigger fight that was about to come.

Somehow, he had become at the center of their conflict, and he could tell it was just a matter of time before they figured out that they did not have to be mad at each other-he was the one they should both be mad at. He was the one who had messed up the game, the one who had hidden the Questions, the one who Rallie-the one who Rallie liked, which was weird too? It was not like he had not thought about girls or even as he had never thought about Rallie like that. He had.

But, asking her out? The idea was paralyzing.

'Okay,' Noah said, pushing open the door to the diner. 'Let us go in.'

A woman standing behind the register, her white hair in short beauty-parlor curls, looked them up and down skeptically, as though she was trying to decide if they were trouble. 'You can’t track mud all over the place,' she said finally.

The dinner was warm, with a round display of desserts near the register that turned, showing huge cakes and pies piled with icing and oozing filling. There were little glass dishes of Jell-O and others of rice pudding studded with raisins, each one covered in plastic wrap.

Noah could smell something frying in the back, and his stomach lurched with hunger.

'Sorry,' said Rallie, taking a step forward, putting on her best-acting

face. 'We were out racing our sailboat and got really into it. A little too much, I guess. We just wanted to get something warm to eat before we go back. The water was really cold.'

The woman behind the register smiled, like the idea of healthy outdoor activity had made their mud-stained appearance wholesome. Or she figured that kids with sailboats had money, however bad they looked. 'Well, okay, but you go dry off in the back first. Table for four?'

'Three,' Rallie said, and the woman blinked in confusion.

Noah narrowed his eyes at the dollie, hanging limply in Harper’s arms.

'Come on.' Harper took Rallie’s arm and hauled her toward the bathrooms. As she walked, she looked back at the white-haired woman at the register. 'Table for four is fine.'

Noah went into the men’s bathroom. There was a row of three urinals and a single stall, all in baby-Jon tile, with paintings of the Ohio River in

the olden days hanging high on the walls. He walked over to the sinks, took off his shoes, and rinsed them off. Then he took off his jeans, wiped dirt and bits of grass from the cuffs, and tried to dry them the best he could with a combination of paper towels and a hand dryer.

They stuck to his legs, damp, and chill. He looked back into the mirror, seeing a slightly sunburnt boy looking back at him, older than he remembered himself, with a familiar mess of brown-black hair and black

eyes that seemed to say: I hope you know what you are doing.

Finally, he wrung out his shirt over one of the sinks, hand-combed his wet hair, and put his jeans back on.

When he left the bathroom, Rallie and Harper were already sitting in a banquette. They waved in his direction, and he slid in just as their server arrived.

She was only a little older than they were, with pink lipstick, blunt-cut black hair, and a nose ring. Handing

over the menus, she paused to stare at the Princess, lolling beside Harper.

'Super scary.'

'Your dollie?'

The waiter said, pointing. Dirt from the riverbed was in the grooves of her nose and mouth and was turning her blond ringlets into thick clumps.

'Oh, yes,' said Rallie, with a dark look in Harper’s direction. 'The scariest.'

The server smiled, handed them the menus, and walked off. Noah was only glad that it seemed like she was seeing a dollie, instead of whatever Kanth Jones, the donut guy, and the Girl at the register had seen. He pushed the thought out of his mind and studied the menu. They had twelve seventy-five that they could spend and still get home-and that was budgeting on loaning Harper a quarter for her bus fare.

There were biscuits and eggs in white sausage gravy with hash

browns, big enough for them to split two plates three ways, for five dollars. But there was also a turkey bacon club sandwich that came with fries and slaw for a little more than seven dollars, and if they got water with that instead of sodas, and figured on a tip of a dollar, they would still have money left over. And there were the three eggs with hash browns and toast for three ninety-five-just enough that they could not afford it all around.

There was a bowl of chili for two ninety-five that seemed promising.

You could get a side of fries for another two-fifty. Maybe if they got three orders of chili and one side of fries?

Thinking about what they could afford to eat was making his mouth water. If they did not figure out something soon, he was going to order it all and have no way home.

'Be right back,' Rallie said, and headed off toward the counter, leaving him alone at the table with Harper.

'Maybe you should go after her,' Noah said. 'Talk.'

'Maybe you should go after her,' Harper told him, pushing loose strands of wet hair behind her ears.

Noah sighed. 'Don’t be like that.'

'Don’t be like what?' She stared at him unblinkingly. 'Are you going to tell me why you answered all those questions and then lied about it? Why wouldn’t you play even one more time?'

'That doesn’t make any sense.' She folded her arms and balanced her

chin on them, watching him. 'I couldn’t,' Noah said.

'I know,' he said miserably. 'I thought it would be easier-'

He broke off as Rallie came back to the table, holding a bottle of ketchup and another bottle of spicy sauce. She opened her menu, scanning the prices.

'There are free refills on the sodas,' she said. 'We could get one and share it.'

'I asked about the bus, too,' Rallie said, not looking at any of them. 'Next one comes tomorrow, same time as today. I got directions to the stop. It’s a couple of miles from here.'

'And be out a dollar seventy-five,' Noah said.

Harper was silent, worrying her lower lip with her teeth. The Princess’s dark eyes shone in her mud-streaked face, and Noah could not help thinking that everything was going

exactly the way she wanted it to, even if he had no proof of that.

Noah wondered if it were closer to where they had fallen into the river, whether they had gone the wrong way, whether they could have made it, but he did not ask.

Noah felt better, having eaten something since the donut. Harper and Rallie must have felt better too because they were able to agree on the chili and fries, which they devoured down to the

last little burnt, ketchup-and-hot-sauce-covered crisp of fry.

They were still studying the menu when the waiter came back around to take their drink order (tap water) and placed a basket of bread and margarine on the table. They fell on it, ripping apart the rolls, spreading them with margarine, and stuffing them into their mouths.

'I’m so tired,' Rallie said, putting her head down on the table. 'All the walking and the swimming and the

being cold and miserable. I could go to sleep right here. Seriously, under this table. It would be more comfortable than sleeping on the ground was.'

'I know,' Rallie said, groaning. 'I’m stuck here, so I’m in for finishing the quest. But are we seriously going to a cemetery at night and digging a grave?'

'We’re almost done,' Harper said softly. 'We’ve almost made it.'

Noah looked out the window at the street. The sun was still in the sky,

but it would not be for long. Rallie was right. By the time they figured out where they were got there, it would be late.

'If we are going to go tonight, we need to get supplies,' said Noah. 'Something to dig with and a flashlight. All that stuff was in our backpacks, and now it’s at the bottom of the Ohio River.'

Rallie inhaled sharply, and Noah followed her gaze. She was staring at the dollie. Its head was

turned like it was looking out the window. Harper was looking in the same direction, mirroring the dolly's pose perfectly.

'Harper,' he said. 'Stop messing around.'

She turned back to look at them like she was oblivious. He had not seen her turn the Princess’s head toward the window, but she must have. The dollie did not move on its own-had never left the case, needed them to

bring it to the grave. It did not move. 'What...?'

Except for that time in the woods.

He hoped it did not move.

'You know where we're going, right? You know which cemetery we're going to, right?' He thought back to the moment before they got on the bus back home and how he had asked her the samphire thing. The grave is under a willow tree. Skylar will tell us the rest.

Rallie looked about to say something scathing.

Harper nodded, not looking at either of them. 'Yes.'

'You do, right?' Rallie asked.

'Of course,' Harper said, meeting their eyes, looking from Noah to Rallie. 'I just need a map.'

They paid the check with everything but the bus fare home, dumping the grimy pennies from the bottom of their pockets on the other coins and bills. The server smiled at

them on the way out, and Noah smiled back, even though he knew they were completely broke.

Noah would have liked her to seem more confident, but then he would have liked her to stop being so crazy about the Princess and to stop acting like she might be occasionally possessed. Noah would have liked a lot of things.

'Hey,' Rallie said, reaching down past circulars and coupon flyers near the door to pick up a crude tourist

map. It did not have any graveyards on it, but it did have the pottery museum, a few antique pottery stores, and the Carnegie Library. 'Is this any good?'

'The library,' Noah said. 'They'll have detailed maps. We could use this to get there.'

They walked down a few blocks until the library came into view, its stately front looking out onto the water. It was domed on top, with red stone making up the body and carved white stone trim on the windows.

According to the tourist map, the library was not far. Now that she was a bit drier and had eaten something, Rallie seemed almost cheerful. He guessed that at this point there was no way she was not getting in trouble, so maybe she had just stopped worrying about it. She took the lead, Harper trailing behind Noah, holding the Princess as though the dollie had become very heavy.

'Who closes a library on the weekend?' Harper said, kicking one of

the steps softly with the toe of her shoe.

It looked out of place, too grand for what surrounded it. It was also closed. It had been closed since one in the afternoon and was not due to open again until Monday morning.

Noah shrugged, then turned to see what Rallie thought. She was crouched near a basement window, pushing on the glass.

The window slid up a little way, and Rallie wedged her boot into the

open space, scrambling to push it higher. It seemed stuck; the wood had swollen from temperature changes and is unopened for years. 'What does it look like?' She spoke.

'What are you doing?' he whispered.

'Breaking into a government-owned building that we could get arrested for being inside of.'

'Well,' Harper said. 'Okay then.'

'Yes,' she said as the window slid up abruptly with a squeal. 'That’s exactly what I’m doing.'

Rallie shimmied inside, hesitating once she was perched on the inner sill. The room was too shadowed for them to see what she was about to drop down onto.

'Rallie!' Harper yelped.

She jumped... There were a crash and a sound like something metal hitting the floor.

'Rallie,' Noah said warningly.

'Sh-h-h-h-h,' Rallie called back from the darkness, smugness filling her voice. 'See, I’m not so bad at quests after all.'

'That was amazing,' Noah said. 'Exactly what Girl Jann would do.'

'Well, come on then, Tommy sings.' Rallie’s voice, from the dark, was eerily changed. It was like he was talking to Rallie and the character she played at the same time. For a moment he was not sure who that made him. And at that moment he was not sure

who he wanted to be either, but he was grinning like an idiot.

He glanced back at Harper. She looked crushed like she was on the outside of glass looking in at something she wanted desperately. For a moment he felt bad, but he was so happy to feel that way for long. It was fun to act like Tommesings with Rallie, and it was fun to sneak into a building in the middle of the day when even scary things were not that frightening. They were playing, and he could tell she knew that if she

tried to play too, he would stop. 'Desk,' she said. 'Wait a second.'

'What did you land on?' He called to Rallie, moving to slide his legs through.

He heard rustling and something else tip over, crashing and hitting the floor. Then the lights flickered to life, revealing a room filled with metal desks and filing cabinets, their surfaces covered in mounds of paper. Administrative storage area.

'Wow, what is all this stuff?' he asked, walking through space. Books were piled up next to lamps and old black-and-white photographs of the town in tidy black frames with engraved plates. Noah kicked bizarre, jumping wide of the desk that Rallie had hit; the paper was scattered around it, and one of its desk lamps was lying just above the floor, dangling from a cord. He landed near a tall filing cabinet, nearly stumbling into it as he tried not to lose his balance.

A bookshelf had been shoved against the back wall, and one of the shelves was filled with old pottery.

It was exhilarating to be somewhere they were not supposed to be. Like being on the boat. A real adventure, like Tommesings and Girl Jann, would have had.

'Hey! Take Skylar,' Harper called, holding out the dollie as she shimmied down through the window.

He did, putting the Princess on top of one of the cabinets. Lying on her

side, the dolly's eyes watched Noah accusingly as he helped Harper down. As he did, a gust of chilly wind blew through the room, scattering papers.

'We’re not going to be able to close that without a ladder,' Rallie said, pointing at the window.

'It’s too high up.'

Noah bumped his arm against Rallie’s as they followed her. 'I guess you’re not going to loot the place, huh, Jann?'

'We won’t be here long,' said Harper, picking up the Princess and walking toward the door. 'Let us wait and see what we find upstairs,' she told him, grinning, as they stepped into the darkened hall.

The basement of the library was warm and smelled like wood polish and old paper.

Plus, there was so much to see. They explored the conference room, the bathrooms, and two more storage rooms on the basement level. There

was an exhibit of China vases behind glass, and the whole cabinet shook gently as they ran past. Noah inhaled deeply. He felt like he could relax for the first time since they had gotten on the bus.

They were not cold and exposed as they had been outside, and they were not in front of people who could get them in trouble, the way they had been in the donut shop and at the dinner or hanging on for their lives as they had been on the boat.

Then they jogged up the steps and saw the vaulted ceilings, iron railings, and marble of the main floor. According to a legend on the wall, Carnegie was a famous philanthropist who had been born super poor in a small Scottish town, made money in steel, and used it to build libraries on the East Coast, among other good-deed-type things. In the picture, he looked like an angry old man with a short beard.

He did not look like the kind of guy who liked stories, but Noah

thought he must have had to, to have built so many libraries.

'Hey,' Harper said, calling to him from the second floor, where there was a rotunda that looked down on the reference desk on the first floor. 'Come check this out!'

He grinned and ran for the stairs, quest forgotten.

There was something about being alone in an empty building. There was something about racing up the stairs and hanging over the balcony,

your shout bouncing off the walls. Noah and Harper and Rallie dashed through the upstairs gallery, through the big rooms. And without ever saying so, they started playing. Not their old game, which was still contentious, although Rallie and Noah slipping into those characters on the way in made it easier to slip into new ones.

First Harper and Noah pretended to be monsters hiding in their library lair when Rallie as the monster hunter came in. When they got tired of that, they went behind the back

of the reference desk and rifled through the drawers, finding-in addition to pens, pencils, a flash drive, and a bunch of rubber bands-a pair of blue hoop earrings, a mystery novel with the cover ripped off, and an eraser in the shape of a delete key. At the desk, Noah was even able to call the marina and leave the promised message about the boat while Harper looked on.

She chased them around for a while, trying to slay them, before they ganged up and chased her back, threatening to turn her into a monster

too. They slid across the floor in their stocking feet, hiding behind stacks and riding on the book carts, shrieking as they went.

Rallie found a break room with a small kitchenette. There was a coffeepot, tea bags and sugar packets, and a refrigerator that contained five slightly wrinkly apples, a low-fat yogurt, a dry-looking hunk of cheddar, and a full package of Oreos. Four folding chairs surrounded a table covered in review copies of books that had not been released yet.

'Look at this!' Harper held up a book they would all been waiting for one that was not due out for months.

'And no one’s going to be in until Monday,' Noah said, sitting in one of the chairs and stretching out, dumping his damp jacket onto the table. 'We can sleep here tonight. We are going to be warm and dry, and it’s going to be amazing.'

'We still have to go to the graveyard, remember?' Harper stood,

all the giddy joy draining out of her. 'We can’t get comfortable.'

Rallie snickered. He smiled up at the ceiling stupidly.

He sighed. It was true that he did not want to go out into the cold either. And now that the end of the quest was so close, some part of him did not want it to be over. He did not want to go out into the graveyard and find out there was not any magic. It seemed easier to goof around in the

stacks and worry about burying the Princess in the morning.

And just like that, all the fun of running around the library was over. Rallie’s mouth pressed into a thin, resentful line as Harper stalked off toward the main room. Their feud was back on.

Rallie looked after Harper, scowling.

Noah stood up, pacing the small room. 'You guys have to make up. You are friends. You are supposed to be

friends. You can’t just talk or talk in the weird not-talking way you’ve both been.'

Rallie shook her head. 'You don’t understand. It is just-it is easy for Harper. She wants this one thing, and I better want it too. Either I am with her or against her, you know? And she’s like that about everything.'

'I don’t think it’s easy for her,' Noah said.

Rallie sighed. 'If she wants to be friends, then she can say so. I get

that the quest is important, but it seems like maybe it’s the only important thing.'

He found Harper at a long table, where she had spread out several maps, an atlas, and a guidebook. She was standing on a chair, looking down on all of it. The Princess was resting at one end, lying on her side, limp arms outstretched.

Noah sighed again and opened the door to the main room of the library.

'Did you find it?' Noah asked.

She turned with a start. She must not have heard him come in.

'Here,' she said, stepping onto the table and walking over to one of the maps, where she crouched down and pointed. 'Spring Grove Cemetery.'

'You’re sure?' asked Rallie, and it was Noah’s turn to be surprised. He had not expected that she would follow him.

'I didn’t have an aerial view in my dreams, but it looks right,' Harper

said. 'We should go to tonight. There might be streetlights down there, and the moon is full. Even without a flashlight, I think we can find her grave. And then it is over. I promise.'

'I'll copy the map,' Harper said.

Rallie rolled her eyes.

'Okay,' said Noah. 'Get me when you're ready.' He picked up a book of local history that Harper must have pulled from the stacks and walked off toward a couple of couches he had spotted near the picture-book section.

Flopping down, he flipped through the book, skimming over the section on local folklore. And there was a girl who got stood up on her wedding day and was found, weeks later, dead in her wedding gown. Legend had it that her bleached white skeleton ran around playing in traffic and grabbing people.

When Noah got bored, he slipped pieces of paper, on which he had written cryptic words, between the pages. There was not any mention of a Skylar Stella or a haunted dollie, but there was a story about a Dutch girl

who haunted a canal lock and a creepy little boy who hung himself.

A little while later he heard the murmur of voices and hoped that meant that Harper and Rallie were making up. He thought that he would just close his eyes for a second.

They were going to be digging up a grave, and they were going to have to do it with scissors or sticks or whatever other tools they could find. THIS TIME HE dreamed that he was lying on a lawn, looking up at a big

house. He could not get his legs to move. There was something wrong with his vision. It was darkening at the edges, but he could see enough to notice that there were shattered remains of porcelain dollies all around him.

It was going to be challenging work. But it was going to get done; Noah was sure about that. So, he needed to rest a little. He leaned back on the couch, turning his cheek against the crook of his arm.

And then he heard a voice, which he knew to be Skylar’s father. 'She looks just like one of them. She looks just like a broken dollie.'

WHEN HE WOKE up, a woman he did not know was standing over him. She looked like she was about to scream, but he beat her to it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE WOMAN BROUGHT HER THIN ARMS UP Defensively, as though his shouting was attack. He scrambled up onto the couch and then over it,

landing on the other side. She blinked owlishly behind her bright-green glasses. She was about his mother’s age, with short, curly, bright-pink hair.

Above her, light streamed in from the windows. It was Sunday morning. He had slept through the whole night.

'Who are you?' Noah asked the woman.

Looking around, he spotted Harper and Rallie lying on the other couch, heads pillowed on opposite

sides. They were both opening their eyes. Harper pushed herself up.

'I work here,' she said. 'I’m a librarian. I came in on the weekend like I always do I have to do my orders for new books, and it is easier when there are not any patrons. Now, do you want to tell me what you three are doing here? And are you alone? I thought I heard something downstairs.' 'It’s just us,' said Rallie, rubbing her face. 'We left the window open. You probably heard the wind.'

'Um,' Noah said, still dazed from sleep. Answers deserted him.

The librarian peered at the three of them more closely. 'You’re lucky I didn’t immediately call the police. How old are you?'

She turned to Rallie and Harper. 'Where exactly do your parents think you are?'

His brain was finally catching up to what was going on, and he realized just how much trouble they were in. 'Twelve,' he said.

Rallie shrugged.

'Well, we’re going to go into the office and we’re going to call them right now, okay? And you better not have vandalized this place, or I’m going to change my mind and call the cops after all.'

'We didn’t mess up anything,' Harper said. 'Look around and see if we’re telling the truth, and then if we are, you can let us go. We won’t be any more trouble.'

Harper did not seem to be holding her, which was unusual. He thought about the last time he had woken up and found the Princess not where she had been the night before, but when he glanced around the library, nothing else seemed amiss. The couches had not been ripped; there was no scattered stuffing and no tossed packages of food from the break room.

Adrenaline spiked through Noah. He considered running. If they all sprinted for the doors, he was certain they would make it. Rallie’s

shoes were off, which was a problem, but she could grab them. And then there was the dollie.

'It’s either we call your parents,' the pink-haired librarian said, 'or we call the police.'

'Come on in the back and I’ll make you a cup of tea,' the pink-haired librarian said. 'You all look like you could use it.'

By that point, though, he had lost his chance. The librarian was waving them up off the couches, and he

could not catch either girl's eye, so if he ran, he was not sure they would follow.

They must have seemed scruffy as they shuffled to the break room in the same clothes they had been wearing for a day and two nights. The cat ears on Rallie's hoodie were bent at odd angles, and there was ink smeared across Harper's cheek like one of the pens she had been using had started to bleed. Noah wondered if the librarian thought they were homeless kids. He

wondered if telling her they would make her let them go.

'You don’t know?' Noah asked. He looked around again, as though somehow the dollie was going to materialize out of the ether.

Halfway across the library floor, Harper stopped. 'Wait, where’s the Princess?' Her voice was high-pitched, panicked.

'A dollie,' Noah said. 'She’s old. Harper must have lost her.'

The librarian raised her eyebrows, as though waiting for an explanation.

'Well, where did you have her last?' Rallie asked Harper.

'Before that, she was on the map table,' Noah put in. 'Maybe you forgot-'

'I brought her with me when I went to the couch,' she said. 'I know I did. She was right there next to me when I went to sleep.'

'I saw the dollie,' Rallie interrupted, 'when we went to sleep. Someone must have gotten up and moved her.'

Harper started to go look when the librarian caught her arm.

'All of you,' she said with an impressive firmness. 'You will go into the break room, and then we'll deal with the missing dollie and your parents and everything else. The library is closed. If the dollie is here,

we will find it. Meanwhile, it is not going anywhere. Now, let us go.'

Noah hoped the dollie was not going anywhere.

'I’m Jatherner Rausse,' she said. 'You may call me Miss Jatherner. Not Kathy, Jatherner.'

They sat down on folding chairs around the break-room table as the librarian put on the electric kettle. She looked through the cabinets until she found a package of Fig Newtons,

which she ripped open and put in front of them.

'I’m Harper,' Harper said. 'Harper Bell. And this is Rallie Magnaye and Noah Ethan.'

Steam rose from each, along with the comforting smell of bruised leaves. 'We don’t have milk, but I’ll put the sugar on the table. Now, I am going to call my director and inform her of what is going on. I am going to lock this door, but I will be right back, so if you need to use the bathroom or anything, I

promise that I will take you as soon as I return.'

'Very melodic names,' said the librarian, pulling mugs out of a cupboard. The water had heated quickly, so she was able to take out tea bags, drop one in each mug, and fill them with boiling water.

She went out, leaving them alone, the click of the latch signaling that she was not kidding about locking them inside.

Noah had no idea how they were going to get out of the break room. No idea how they were going to find the Princess. No idea how they were going to do anything but go home in disgrace, their quest forever undone. The idea of stopping now, though, when they were so close, grated on Noah. It drove him nuts that if they had just gone to the graveyard last night-if he had just been less lazy- the quest might be over and done.

Harper peered at her mug. Then, abruptly, she wiped her eyes with

the back of one hand. 'I’m sorry,' she said.

Rallie sighed. 'It’s not your fault. I’m the one who broke in.'

'And I’m the one who fell asleep,' Noah said. 'You’re the one who kept reminding us, Harper. It’s not your fault-'

Harper cut him off. 'That’s not what I mean. I thought that we could do this thing, and when it was over, we would have something that no one else had an experience that would keep us

together. 'You’re going to be too busy thinking about boys and trying out for school plays and whatever to remember. It is like you are both forgetting everything. You are forgetting who you are. I thought this would remind you. And I am sorry because it was stupid. I was stupid.' I can see you changing.' She turned to Noah. 'You’re going to be one of those guys who hang out with their teammates and dates cheerleaders and don’t remember what it was like to

make up stuff. And you-' She whirled on Rallie.

'That’s not fair,' Rallie said.

'Yeah, I didn’t forget,' said Noah. Harper sounded just like his dad, except in reverse. He did not want to forget, and he wanted everyone to stop talking like it was inevitable, like it would happen whether he wanted it to or not.

Rallie rolled her eyes. 'We’re not zombies just because we like the stuff you don’t.'

'No, you’re right,' Harper said, her voice speeding up and getting louder like she was afraid she was going to be cut off before she got it all out. 'It’s not fair. We had a story, and our story was important. And I hate that both of you can just walk away and take part of my story with you and not even care. I hate that you can do what you are supposed to do, and I cannot. Noah and Rallie were quiet for a long moment.

I hate that you are going to leave me behind. I hate that everyone

calls it growing up, but it seems like dying. It feels like each of you is being possessed and I’m next.'

There was a long silence.

Before they could speak, the door opened, and Miss Jatherner came in. Her glasses were hanging around her neck from a chain, and she looked a little nervous. 'I am going to assume that means we’re going with the original plan.' She nodded to herself, her pink curls bouncing as she did. 'Now, who wants to call home first?'

'Well,' she said, 'the director wants me to tell you that if there’s something wrong at home, we can call social services instead of your parents.'

Rallie stood up, pushing her chair back. 'I’ll go. My grandmother’s probably worried.'

'You sure?' Harper said. 'I can call first if you want.'

Rallie gave her a withering look. 'No, that’s okay. Don’t do me any favors.'

When they were gone, Noah drank his tea and ate five Fig Newtons, although they tasted like nothing in his mouth. He chewed and swallowed automatically.

'Are you mad at me?' Harper asked.

'How much trouble do you think she’s going to get in?' Harper asked him.

'No,' Noah said. Then, after considering it a little more, 'Maybe.'

She slumped at the table and rested her head in a gesture that mirrored his. He thought about the way they would all been friends for so long that they even shared mannerisms. He thought about how they had met, years ago.

'Lots,' he said, putting his head down on his arms.

He thought about what Harper had said about growing up and losing themselves.

And how bad it would be if Rallie got in so much trouble that they could never see her again.

And how awful it would be if Rallie and Harper never made up.

He thought about what his mother and father were going to say when he called, and what he could say back.

He was still thinking about those things when the door opened and Rallie came back in, wearing shoes. She looked grim.

He thought about the stories, all the stories. The ones they had made up and the ones they never had.

'How was it?' Noah asked Rallie after a long moment. She had been fiddling with the electric kettle switch, turning it on and then off again, seeming lost in thought.

'Okay, Harper,' Miss Jatherner said. 'Your turn.'

Harper stood up and went out with only a single glance back.

'Oh,' she said. 'Weird... My aunt Linda was there. Grandma had called her. She had wanted to go out looking for me yesterday after I did not come back, but she knew she could not see very well at night. She was mad, but I do not know, she sounded different. Like she realized she was old for the first time.'

'You think you’re going to be grounded forever?' Noah asked.

He did not want to never see Rallie again. Before he chickened out,

he blurted out the words. 'So, if I asked you to go to the movies with me or something-'

'Oh, yes,' Rallie said. 'Forever and a day. Even if she lets Aunt Linda help out more.'

She leaned against the counter, glancing over at him, a smile lifting one corner of her mouth. 'Are you asking me out?'

'Yes,' he said, wiping his hands on his jeans. His palms had started to sweat. 'Yes. Will you-'

'Yes,' she cut him off, saying the word very quickly, not looking at him. He wondered if she felt as awkward as he did. He was glad he asked, and he was glad she said yes, but he was also glad she was grounded, so it would not be happening soon.

The door opened, and they both jumped. Harper came in and threw herself into one of the folding chairs. She looked if anything, even more, upset than Rallie had.

'You, okay?' Noah asked.

'I need a ride,' Harper mumbled, putting her head in her hands again.

'What?' Rallie asked.

He stood and walked toward the door. As he was going out, he looked back at Harper. Rallie was standing behind her chair, hand on her shoulder. And at that moment he realized that he did not want them to have to go back never having completed the quest. He wanted them

to finish this thing the way Harper had imagined: together.

'I couldn’t get my dad, and my mom’s working until late. She asked if one of your folks could drive me.'

Miss Jatherner topped up her cup with more hot water. 'Noah, it’s your turn.'

He watched as the librarian locked the break-room door. Then he followed her through the library to an office on the third floor, where there was a small desk, piled with more

review copies of books and papers, scattered with pens. A folding chair with a padded seat rested in front of it and a cloth chair on wheels behind it.

'Have a seat,' she said, sitting down behind the desk. She picked up the phone and handed it over to him. 'You dial the number, but I need to talk to your parents. I will tell them where you are, and then I will hand you the phone. I'll go outside to give you some privacy unless you want me to stay here, okay?'

He nodded.

He reminded himself that he would not care if they were upset. He was still mad about what his dad had done and how little his mother had cared. If he kept that in the front of his thoughts, then nothing they could say would bother him. He just would not care.

The librarian took the receiver and started explaining how she had found Noah sleeping on the couch in the Carnegie Public Library in East

Eaton-yes, East Eaton, Ohio-and yes, he was fine, he had two friends with him, and they were fine too. She gave the address of the library and some abbreviated directions.

Then she held out the phone to him.

He wiped his hands against his jeans and hoped it was true. He dialed and handed the phone over.

Noah took it and brought it slowly to his ear as Miss Jatherner went

out the door, closing it softly behind her. 'Mom?' Noah said.

'It’s me,' said his father. 'You all, right?'

Noah’s heart sped. 'Yes, like she said. I’m fine.'

'I never meant to make you feel like you had to run away,' Noah’s dad said softly. As soon as his father had picked up, Noah had expected a lot of shouting and the phone getting slammed in its cradle. But his father did not sound angry. Noah was not sure

why, but more than anything else, his dad sounded scared.

'That’s not what I was doing,' he said. 'I was on a quest. I was going to come back to when I was finished.' Once Noah said the words, he knew they were true. He would have gone back. He had just needed a little break.

There was a long pause on the other end of the line, as though his father was not sure how to respond. 'So, this quest,' he said finally, tentatively. 'Are you done with it now?'

'Not yet,' said Noah. 'I thought I was, but I don't think that I am.'

'We’re going to get in the car, and we’re going to be there in two and a half hours. Do you think you’ll be finished then?'

'I don’t know.'

'Your mother’s been really worried. You want to talk to her?'

Noah wanted to tell her that everything was okay, that he was fine, but he did not want to hear her voice and realize how much he had upset her.

'No,' he said after a moment. 'See you when you get here.'

His father gave a heavy sigh. 'You know I don’t understand you.'

'You don’t have to.' Noah just wanted the conversation over, before either of them said something awful.

'I want to,' his father said.

Noah snorted.

There was a long silence on the other end of the line. 'I’m not good at this kind of thing, but even though I

don’t always get things and your mother tells me I don’t know how to talk, I wanted to tell you that I’ve been thinking about what I did with those toys ever since it happened. It was a mean thing to do. I grew up mean, and I don’t want you to have to grow up mean too.'

Noah was silent. He had never heard his father talk that way before.

'When I saw you with those figures, I pictured you getting hassled at school. I thought you needed to be

tougher. But I’ve been thinking that protecting somebody by hurting them before someone else gets the chance isn’t the kind of protection that anybody wants.'

'So, I’ll see you soon,' his father told him. 'Good luck with the quest.' He said the word as though it was a strange, unfamiliar shape in his mouth, but he said it.

'Yes,' Noah said. It was all he could bring himself to say. He had no idea his father thought about anything

like this. All the anger had drained out of him, leaving him feeling as fragile as one of those paper-thin China cups.

'Bye, Dad,' said Noah, and hung up the phone.

He sat there for a long moment, breathing hard. Something had shifted, something seismic, and he needed to be still long enough to have it settle inside of him. Then he stood up and went out the door.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Noah looked under the sofa the girls had slept on and then under the one where he had fallen asleep-after all, the last time he had woken up, the dollie was resting right next to his head. He knelt with a shudder at the thought of her lying directly underneath where he had slept, as though she might reach up to her tiny porcelain hands and drag him down through the couch cushions. She was not there, though.

The Princess was not under the table, either. She was not in any of the

chairs, nor anywhere obvious on the rug. She was not anywhere he could see.

MISS JATHERNER WAS SHELVING A FEW BOOKS NEARBY and put them back on the cart when he emerged from the office. Her pink hair was as bright as the synthetic mane of a plastic horse.

'Everything okay?' She asked him.

'They’re coming,' Noah said, trying to put the strangeness of his

father’s words behind him. 'Did you see Harper’s dollie?'

She shook her head. 'I walked by the table where you left all those maps, but there was nothing else there. Do you want to look at yourself?'

Noah nodded and followed her to the couches. He noticed her shoes for the first time, bright yellow with bows. She did not look like any librarian he had ever seen before. She did not look like an adult he had met before.

He did not feel her either, did not sense the gaze of her dull eyes watching him from some corner of the room, the way he had when she was in the cabinet in Harper’s living room.

While he searched, Miss Jatherner started gathering up the books and maps Harper had left on the table the night before.

'What was it that your kids were trying to find?' the librarian asked, frowning at him. He could tell that Miss Jatherner did not know what

to make of the story about the dollie. He was not sure that she even believed there was a dollie. If not, he wondered what she thought he was looking for.

He shrugged. 'Nothing.'

'It looks like someone was researching a cemetery near here,' said Miss Jatherner gently. 'Spring Grove? I saw a few pieces of copy paper with directions drawn on them and scratched out. What is in Spring Grove Cemetery? You can tell me, Noah. I promise that I'll try to understand.'

That felt a little too real, there is a potter with a grisly story.

'Downstairs?' Noah took a few steps across the library floor before Miss Jatherner cleared her throat.

'I don’t think so,' Miss Jatherner said. 'I let you look around, but enough is-a enough. Come on.'

'Have you ever heard a story, a ghost story, about a girl who jumped off her roof?' He hesitated, pressing the front of his sneaker against one of the legs of the table. He wanted to trust

her, but he knew he could not trust her too much-she had never believed him if he told her everything. 'Like under mysterious circumstances? Maybe one named Skylar Stella.'

Miss Jatherner shook her head. 'The only Stella I can think of was a fancy worker-a very well-known potter locally. We even have a display of his work downstairs, courtesy of the museum. There was a grisly story about him, but I don’t know about any Skylar Stella.'

Noah remembered the wall of fragile-looking vases he had seen in the basement. He had run past them, not looking at them, and now he was itching to know what he had missed. He had to get down there. He had to. His heart started to pound with renewed hope. There was a secret there-a secret that might not help them to finish the quest but would prove that it was a real one. A real quest for a real ghost.

He concentrated on that as the librarian led him back to the break room and opened the door with the key

sticking out of the lock. Inside, the girls were sitting at opposite ends of the table wearing near-identical expressions of worry.

'I am going to call the director back,' Miss Jatherner said, with a bright smile that might have been forced. 'Let her know that everything’s been resolved. Then we will figure out some lunch for your kids. It’s almost noon.'

'Thank you,' Rallie said quietly.

'Thank you,' Harper and Noah echoed automatically.

The librarian went out, and Noah waited until he heard the turn of the key in the lock. Then he put both his hand's palm down on the table like he was going to give a speech.

'Okay,' he said, looking from one friend to the other. 'We need a plan. We need to break out of this room before the librarian comes back.'

Rallie stood up, looking a little confused, but hopeful. 'How?'

'It doesn’t matter,' Harper said, staying seated. 'We don’t have the Princess anymore. Even if we get out of here and I have no idea how we could do that we can’t finish the quest without her.'

'We’ll find her,' said Noah. 'I looked around where we were sleeping, and she wasn’t there, but that doesn’t mean anything. We can find her. We can do this. Are you sure you did not bring her with you anywhere else? Anywhere?'

Harper shook her head. It seemed to Noah that giving them that speak about all the stuff she hated had drained away from the part of her that had driven her this far. Or it was losing the Princess. Either way, Harper looked more defeated than he had ever seen her. 'No. When I sat down on the couch, she was with me. I was worried about rolling over on her since she is so fragile, so I put her on the floor and hung my hand down to keep touching her. I would have known if someone moved her.'

'Creepy,' Rallie said. 'What is it with you and the Princess? You are always holding her and touching her. Don’t you find the whole she-was-made-from-human-bones thing even a little bit, like, scary?'

Harper gave her a look.

'I don’t mean it like that,' said Rallie. 'Not like you’re being weird. Are you sure she is not doing something for you? Making you act like what she wants?'

'Oh, so now you believe in the possibility of a ghost,' Harper sneered.

He leaned against the wall, folding his arms, and trying to concentrate. They could tell Miss Jatherner they had to go to use the bathroom all of them at the same time and then sneak out the window. The only problem was that Miss Jatherner would not let them all use the bathroom at once. Well, that and the fact that the windows in the basement were far up the wall; they had had to drop down during the climb in. And just one more

problem-he was not sure there was a window in the girls’ bathroom.

'We’ll find the Princess,' Noah insisted, interrupting before they started fighting again. 'Just as soon as we figure a way out of this room. Which we will. In just a second an idea is going to come to me, and it’s going to be a good one.'

Rallie stared up at the ceiling. Then she stepped onto one of the folding chairs, and from there onto the table.

'What are you doing?' Harper asked.

Rallie went up on her toes and shoved at one of the ceiling tiles. It moved over, showing the metal grid that suspended it. Beyond was only darkness, like the gap left by a missing tooth. 'I have an idea,' she said. 'Look at how low the ceiling is in here. And look at the door-it’s different from the others; the knob is shiny.'

'So?' Noah said, walking over and frowning at what she was doing.

'Everything else in the building is old, but here everything’s new. This was built recently. I bet the drop ceiling hides an older, high ceiling, and there might be some venting or something to crawl through in the new wall.'

'You’re going to go up there?' Noah asked.

'Brace the table and I will,' Rallie said. 'It’ll be just like climbing the monkey bars on the playground back in elementary.'

Noah stared at her in awed amazement. 'Do you even think this will work?' He asked.

She looked back at him. 'It works in the movies.' She jumped, caught the metal supports, and pulled herself up into the dark as though she was in gym class.

'Even if you get to the other side,' called Harper, 'the doors still locked.'

Noah started grinning. 'No. Miss Jatherner leaves the key in it. If

she can get to the other side, she really can open the door. We’re getting out of here.'

'Ow,' Rallie said from above them, muffled by the tiles still in place. 'I can’t see the vent.'

'Maybe there isn’t one,' Harper said. 'Come back down.'

They heard a metallic clang and a sharp yelp, then more clanging. Noah hoped that Miss Jatherner’s office was soundproof. Then the clanging

stopped and there was a solid sound, like a body hitting the floor.

Harper looked at Noah, a wild hope in her eyes. He grinned at her.

Then the door opened, Rallie standing on the other side and breathing heavily. 'Come on,' she said. 'Quick.'

'Okay,' said Noah. 'Here’s the plan. We all go look for the Princess. I will take the basement. Harper, you retrace your steps. Rallie, you take the stacks on this level. We all meet up on

the side of the library-the one that is close to the street. Okay?'

'What if we don’t find her?' Rallie asked.

'We have to find her,' Harper said.

'Since we’re split up, we’re not going to know who finds what, so we just have to cover as much ground as we can and then meet up.' Miss Jatherner might be back soon. She could have gone out for the promised lunch, but that still did not give them

much extra time. They had to be quick. 'See you guys in ten.'

Harper nodded and started toward the couches. Rallie saluted and headed for the stacks.

Noah walked down the stairs to the basement. He felt a little bit guilty knowing he had a reason for deciding to look for the Princess in the basement-a reason that only had to do with finding her. He wanted to read about the Stella guy who had made the

pottery. He wanted to know if he was some relative of Skylar's.

Suddenly the cabinet sprang to bright life. The pieces inside were made of some porcelain so thin that it was translucent and shaped into the most fantastical forms. There were teapots corded with garlands of tiny perfect flowers; egg cups shaped with a filigree netting in the quatrefoil pattern of old church windows, all of it in shining gold, and vases with intricately shaped arms, their bodies painted with a delicate pattern of cherry blossoms. All

the pieces seemed to glow from within, so thin, and fine was the bone China from which they were made.

The basement was quiet, the only sound coming from the wind blowing through the window they had left open. It was dark in the hallway, and he could see why he had not noticed the display: the lights in the case were off. He felt along the wall until he found the switch and flicked it.

They were just like the pieces in Noah's dream of Skylar, except that these were perfect.

Despite the successes of American potteries in East Eaton at the turn of the century, they have still considered no match for their European cousins. Patriotism and ambition pushed Wilkinson Clark China to make something unique, new porcelain was so fine that it would secure the place of their company as not just equal to but better than any the world over. They wanted to make art.

And there was a plaque in the center with a black-and-white picture of a stern-looking man standing near the river. It read:

Orchid Ware was the result of a collaboration between two men: Philip Dowling and Lukas Stella. Dowling was a pottery technician and a specialist in clay chemistry. He had considerable experience and was able to produce the process that allowed Wilkinson-Clark to create a porcelain that was very thin but also possessed sufficient structural integrity for commercial production.

Part of what made the porcelain so solid was the high percentage of bone ash from cattle bones that were de-gelatinized and then calculary at extremely hot temperatures.

Stella was an artist. Rumored to be difficult to work with and often found shouting at underlings or accusing them of spying on him, he was also a genius, able to coax beauty from clay. His steady hand, wild imagination, and myriad influences-Art Nouveau, Moorish, Persian, and Indian, as well as the English and German pottery of his

childhood-helped him make Orchid Ware objects that were different and altogether finer than any porcelain produced in East Eaton before. Stella became obsessive, working around the clock and refusing to allow the sale of any piece that was less than perfect.

Orchid Ware took off immediately. Highlighted at the World's Fair in Chicago, it won numerous awards and stunned the international ceramics community. Immediately there was a demand among the discerning ladies of the day.

Even the First Girl commissioned a piece. But despite the flood of orders, Orchid Ware turned out not to be profitable to produce. Each piece took too much time to complete, and many were destroyed in kilns built to fire much sturdier ceramics. Others broke during shipping. For every piece that survived, fifteen were either broken or deemed too imperfect to be salable. But despite the drain, Orchid Ware was on the company's finances, Wilkinson-Clark's pride forced them to continue producing it, even at a loss.

Then tragedy struck. Lukas Stella's daughter went missing in the early autumn of 1895. Quickly, though, sympathy turned to terror when blood and hair were discovered in his office in the factory and on a leather, apron belonging to him. It was hypothesized that he had murdered his daughter and used the method of calcinating cattle bone to dispose of her body. This was backed up by the accounts of his late wife's sister, who had been a caretaker to the daughter, and who reported Lukas Stella coming home in an

unhinged state of mind and locking her in one of the rooms in their large Victorian home. When she escaped from the room, he and his daughter were already missing.

Lukas Stella denied murdering his daughter but did not explain the evidence found in his workspace, nor an account of his daughter’s whereabouts, saying only, 'I am not her killer, but I am the one who has given her new life.' Further questioning caused him to break down, screaming, weeping, and insisting that his

daughter 'was like an angel who fell to Earth and was 'his most perfect creation.' He was convicted of murder and sentenced to execution.

After his conviction, the production of Orchid Ware ceased. All told, pieces were made for less than three years, but are still avidly collected today and are unbelievably valuable. Every few years rumors surface of fantastical pieces made by Lukas Stella at the height of his madness- samovars, a working porcelain clock, and even a jointed

dollie-although has given the fragile nature of Orchid Ware, these rumors are unlikely to prove true. Still, the mystique of Orchid Ware persists and will persist for many years to come.

This collection is on loan from a private collector.

Noah stared at the plaque. He read it again to be sure he understood it, his dream echoing in his ears. If what he and Harper had dreamed was true, if Skylar was real, then Lukas Stella did not kill his daughter. Her

aunt must have caused Skylar to fall off the roof, and Lukas- who, murderer or not, was super crazy-must have found her body and decided that the only fitting tribute was to turn her into a dollie made from his precious Orchid Ware.

A shudder ran through him. It felt like electricity sparking over his skin.

Upstairs, he heard a sound like someone calling out-calling a name. Miss Jatherner must be in the library

looking for them. Noah did not have any more time to worry about Lukas Stella. He had to find the dollie. He had to find Skylar.

Quickly he walked into the first room they had come into from the window. It was carpeted in brown paper, making the floor seem covered in fallen snow. There was no dollie, though. Not on any of the filing cabinets or the bookshelf on the far end or underneath the desks.

Crossing the hall, he went into another room, this one piled with boxes of books. He peered into each, but there was no sign of the Princess.

Then, not sure where else to look, he ducked into the girls' bathroom. He had never been in the girls' room before, and something was embarrassing about it. He did not want to get caught there. Looking around, though, it was not that different from a boys' bathroom. The tile was pink, and there were no urinals on the wall, just a row of three stalls and a single sink-but

otherwise, it was identical. He walked toward the sinks and the mirror without much hope until he noticed the metal trash can be rest against one wall.

The Princess was there, lying inside the trash can, on a bed of wadded-up paper towels, her odd eyes staring up at Noah. He took a sudden, startled step back and met his gaze in the mirror.

But even that was strange. Instead of his regular skin, he saw a

face made from cracked white China with black holes where the eyes should have been. And when he opened his mouth to scream, his reflection stayed perfectly serene, lips motionless on what seemed like a mask.

Then he blinked and he was looking at his face. Everything was normal, except that his heart was hammering against his chest.

He told himself that Harper had gotten up in the middle of the night and come down to use the bathroom.

She had been half-asleep and had left the Princess on a sink and the dollie had fallen into the trash. It was a weird explanation, but he was going to assume that was what had happened. Otherwise, he was going to have to accept that she had lured him to the basement, so he had read her story. Later he would be okay with thinking about that, like once he was out in the sunshine again.

He was also going to assume that he had freaked himself out and that is why he had thought he saw

something in the mirror-something that was not there.

Noah leaned down and carefully took the Princess out of the trash. Holding her to his chest, he started to run out the door and up the stairs, hitting the front door of the library with his shoulder and plunging out into the cold autumn day.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

RALLIE WAS ALREADY WAITING ON THE SIDE OF THE library, squatted down and half-hidden

behind a bush. She was about to say something when she spotted the Princess in his arms and jumped up.

'You did it,' she said in a half-whisper. 'You found her!'

He nodded vigorously. 'Where’s Harper?'

They pelted down the street, racing through winding roads that led to Main. After a few blocks, Noah paused, panting. When he looked back over his shoulder, he did not see Miss Jatherner anymore. He was not sure

the librarian’s bright-yellow shoes with the bows were the kind that you could run in.

But just as the words came out of his mouth, Harper rounded the corner of the building, running toward them. He caught a glimpse of pink hair behind her. 'Go!' she shouted. 'Go! Go!'

'We made it,' Noah said.

'You found the Princess.' Harper smiled at him. She had not smiled like that since before he had lied

to her about Tommy sings, since before they started the quest.

He felt the same elation he had aboard the little Sunfish: the certainty that they were going to make it and the pleasure that came from solving a problem that had only minutes before seemed insurmountable. Only now, looking back, did he realize how truly crazy their middle-of-the-night plan to find Skylar Stella's grave had been. But here they were, within minutes of the cemetery. They might turn out to be the kind of people who finished quests.

He found himself grinning back. 'I found something else, too. About her story. I know what she wanted us to find out.'

'Not now,' said Rallie, shaking her head. 'We've got to keep moving. For all we know, the librarian might be calling the cops.'

'Do you still have the directions to the cemetery?' Noah asked Harper.

Harper nodded. 'But we aren't going to make it there on foot. Unless-'

Then she took off again, racing up Main Street.

They ran after her. She stopped in front of the gaming store, where a few bikes rested, some chained to a nearby pole and two leaned against a wall. She eyed them speculatively.

'You can’t be serious,' Noah said. 'We’re just going to-' picked one up and started to walk with it toward Rallie. 'You pedal,' Harper told her. 'I’ll get on the handlebars. And I’ll tell you where to go.'

Rallie nodded, throwing her leg over the bike, and steadying it.

'No worse than taking the boat,' Harper said, climbing up onto the front of the bike. 'We'll bring them back. If we are fast enough, maybe whoever they belonged to won't even have finished their game yet.'

Shaking his head, he grabbed the other unlocked bike. Shoving the Princess inside his sweatshirt, and with one arm holding the old, creepy dollie in place, he mounted the seat and

pedaled off after Harper. They whizzed down the street, hair blowing behind them, his legs pumping harder and harder as they sped on.

'This way,' Harper shouted against the wind, a flimsy piece of paper blowing in one hand, the other arm extended to indicate an upcoming left turn.

At that thought, he felt something move inside his shirt.

Noah’s bike wobbled, and he nearly crashed. He skidded to a halt

instead, breathing raggedly. Rallie zoomed ahead, down the street.

'Stop it,' he told the Princess firmly, not caring if he sounded like a lunatic. 'I get that you’re excited. I get that we are close to the end. And I even get that you like to freak me out. But I do not have my bike helmet, and you are made of some super-thin Orchid Ware, so if we crash, we are both going to break. Okay?'

The dollie did not move, which did not mean anything since the

squirming might just have been his imagination. He pushed off the road and started to pedal again just as Rallie and Harper rode onto the lawn of the Spring Grove Cemetery.

He followed them, dismounting, and dropping his bike beside theirs on the soft grass near the entrance, wheels still spinning. The graveyard was a tidy meadow of trimmed hedges and orderly stones. They spread out over the hill that ran up against a wooded area. A path of

white gravel veered along the side, barely wide enough for a car.

'Okay,' Rallie said. 'Now what?'

'We look for a willow tree,' said Harper. 'You know, one of the ones with the long branches and the leaves that hang down.'

Harper nodded. 'I think so, but I think regular willows have leaves that hang down too, just not as far.'

'A weeping willow?' Noah put in.

'Okay,' Rallie said. 'Depressed-looking trees. Got it. If it seems droopy and miserable at all, I’m calling you to confirm its willowy status.'

Noah unzipped his sweatshirt and glanced toward Harper. 'Hey. You want to go back to carrying Skylar?' Smirked... 'How come? Does she make you nervous?'

Harper put out her hands. 'I do, coward.'

Noah shrugged. 'I just thought that you'd want her since you brought her all this way. But if you don't-'

He handed over the Princess with great relief. Now when he looked at her, he could not help but believe she was made from the bones of a dead girl. It made touching her shuddersome. He did not care if Harper teased him. He did not want to carry the dollie through the cemetery surrounded by dead people.

Noah forced a laugh as they walked through the quiet graveyard, past flowerpots, and wreaths, past statues to fallen soldiers and memorial benches, and a large expanse of grass dotted with bronze grave markers. They passed fat oak trees, a smallish collection of pine trees, and something that Noah thought might be a locust tree, but which was not a willow.

'Yell if you see anything,' said Rallie. 'Like willow trees... or zombies.'

'I don’t see the tree,' Rallie said finally. 'Are you sure this is the right graveyard?'

'We’re missing it somehow,' said Harper nervously. She could not keep still, running ahead of them and then back again. 'We have to be. The grave is supposed to be under a willow tree.'

They kept walking, crossing the same ground, staring at the same trees.

'Maybe we should just look for the name-for Stella,' Noah said. He

wanted to tell them about the plaque in the library, but he was not sure how much time they had, after all, Miss Jatherner had seen the maps of the cemetery.

'It’s not here,' Harper said finally, her voice exceedingly small. 'I thought-after you found Skylar back at the library-I thought that the grave was going to be here. I thought it was going to work.'

'Yes,' she said. 'I could be wrong about that. I could be wrong about everything.'

Noah flopped down on the grass in front of a large memorial. He had thought the same thing. 'Could you be wrong about the graveyard? I mean, could there be a different one in East Eaton?'

'What do you mean?' Rallie asked, hopping up to sit on a granite headstone and folding her legs under her. 'Don’t give up. We’re so close.'

For a moment they were quiet. It felt like the Earth had tilted on its axis, for Harper to say that. She had been the reason they had come all this way, the reason they had slept in the woods, sailed a boat down the Ohio River, and escaped from a library. She had been the one who believed, no matter what. Noah had never imagined she had any doubts.

...Remained standing, pacing back and forth on the grass. 'Maybe I made it all up. All the stuff I said. I did dream about her. But the rest... I do not

know. It felt true when I said it. But I wanted it to be true so much that maybe I convinced myself it was.'

Fury rose in him, terrible and formless. It wanted to come home and finding his figures gone all over again- as if something had been snatched away and he could not get it back.

Rallie took a quick breath like she was swallowing her need to scream 'I knew it!' at the top of her lungs.

No magic... Just a story.

But he had dreamed about Skylar, and he had seen the plaque on the wall of the library. He had felt her move and he had seen her bones.

So, Harper was just like Rallie and him, doubting herself sometimes. All that meant was that she did not know everything.

'Look, the ghost is real,' Noah said.

'Maybe I just tricked you,' said Harper miserably.

It just figured that Harper would be as stubborn about being talked back into believing something as she was about being talked out of believing things. 'What about the guy on the bus and the donut man both saying something about there being a blond girl with us? And even the Girl at the diner asked if we wanted seats for four. What about that?'

Harper folded her arms. 'The first guy was crazy. The second guy was kidding. And the dinner thing was a coincidence.'

'What about the camp getting trashed?' Rallie asked.

'You never thought that was because of the ghost,' said Harper. 'You never believed in Skylar, Rallie, so don’t try to pretend.'

'Did you, do it?' Rallie asked her. 'I didn’t believe it because I thought maybe it was you.'

'No!' Harper looked genuinely shocked.

'Well, then,' said Rallie. 'Look, I didn’t want to believe, but I have to

admit that a lot of weird things have happened, and you have to admit it too.'

Noah took a deep breath. 'Remember when I said I found something back at the library? It was an exhibition of pottery-of the pottery that a Lukas Stella made-and there was information on his life. He murdered his daughter, but they never found the body.

That cannot be a coincidence. He must have been her father. And I

think the secret that Skylar wanted us to discover was that it was her aunt who killed her-the woman in the dream who chased her around the roof with a broom.

She fell to her death, and her father took her body and made it into a dollie because he was a head case. But he did not kill her, even though everyone thought he did. And the whole thing proves that you are right. That your dreams are real.'

Harper looked at him skeptically. 'Maybe I read the story before-maybe I read about it and then forgot it, so I made up a different version of what happened.'

'Oh, come on,' Rallie said. 'That’s ridiculous.'

Noah shook his head. 'I had a dream, too, that night in the woods. About Skylar. It was... like yours. Rallie, tell her.'

'Okay,' Harper said. 'Maybe Noah is lying to make me feel better.'

'You had a dream?' Harper’s incredulity stung. He remembered how many times he had spoken to her in that tone of voice since they had started this journey and was suddenly deeply sorry. 'How come this is the first time you’re mentioning it to me? And anyway, if they could not find her body, would she even have a grave? Maybe there’s nothing to find.'

'Fine,' Noah said, running his fingers through his hair. 'What do you want me to say? We cannot find the

weeping willow. I don’t know what to do either.'

Rallie slid off the stone and hugged Harper around the waist, resting her chin against Harper’s shoulder. 'It’s okay. It was still an adventure, right? Our last game.'

The words went through Noah like water. He took a deep breath and steeled himself. 'There’s something I have to tell you. Before we go back. I might as well say it now, while Harper is already mad at me.'

Harper and Rallie looked down at him, something in his tone signaling that whatever it was would be important. They watched him as if he were a snake, rearing back to strike.

'When I said that I didn’t want to play anymore-' He stopped, not sure he could go on. 'It wasn’t true exactly. My dad threw out all my- He threw out everything. All of them. Tommy sings and Tristan and Max. Everybody. So, it is not so much that I do not want to play. I can’t.'

There was a long silence. 'Why didn’t you tell us?' Rallie asked finally.

'I couldn’t. I couldn’t, because if I did, then-' He stood up, wiping his eyes. 'Look, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. And I am sorry I did not tell you about the dream. I don’t know why I didn’t.'

Harper just stared at him, her eyes as hard as the Princesses.

'Okay,' he said, taking a few steps back. Tears were burning in his eyes already, and he was suddenly sure there was no way they would

understand. He felt stupid for telling them. He felt stupid for crying. If only he had kept his mouth shut, everything would have been fine. 'How about we all make one more sweep? We can meet back here in a couple of minutes.'

'Noah,' Harper said. 'Wait-'

He did not want to hear how the quest was all his fault, how she would have never taken the Princess out of the case if it was not for his lie; he already knew. He staggered off before she could finish, long legs

carrying him over the uneven ground. He passed rows and rows of marble stones, heading deeper into the old part of the cemetery, where the markers were chipped and weathered. There he flopped down in the grass and let himself cry in big, heaving sobs.

Saying the words out loud- saying what he had been avoiding this whole time, that Tommesings and the rest of them were gone forever, that the game had been taken away from him, that he still wanted to play but couldn’t-hurt. It ripped away from the

fog of numbness and even though it hurt, for the first time since he had lost his figures, he was ready to let go.

He was not sure how much time had passed when he finally stopped crying. It was a beautiful day- crisp, the way early falls days can be warm but have an occasional chill wind. The sky overhead was as Jon as spilled ink from a pen. Leaves shivered above him.

He leaned back and watched the clouds blow across his vision.

'Hey!' he heard Rallie shout. 'He’s here.'

'We were worried,' Harper said, standing over him and looking down. 'We thought you would come back after a minute, and then we thought you would come back after ten minutes, but you didn’t.'

'I’ve been a jerk,' Noah said. 'I know. We’ve all been mad at each other, and I know a lot of it is because of what a jerk I’ve been.'

Harper sat down next to him. 'You should have just told us.'

'I know,' he said. 'Are you mad?'

Harper nodded. 'Of course, I’m mad! But I guess I’m less mad than when I thought you didn’t care about any of it.'

He looked over at Rallie. She was staring at one of the stones as if she did not want to look at him. 'What about you, Rallie-?'

'Get up,' she said suddenly. 'Get up! Get up! Look!'

Harper jumped up and hauled Noah to his feet.

Rallie was pointing to a stone he had been lying in front of on the grass. 'You found it! Noah, you found it.'

The large marble headstone bore the word STELLA on it, and over that, a carving of a willow tree. They stared at it, incredulous smiles giving way to genuine grins and laughter.

It made him feel, for a moment, like no stories were lies. Not Kanth Jones's stories about aliens. Not Dad's stories about things getting better or things getting worse. Not Harper's stories about the Princess. All stories were true ones.

Harper knelt, pushed aside some weeds, and traced smaller words at the base. 'There are names here-it's a family plot. That is why the stone is so big. There's Lukas. And someone named Hedda-that must be Skylar's

mother. And look-a blank spot. An empty place for Skylar.'

'We did it,' Rallie said, her voice soft as any prayer. 'The quest is complete.'

'We have to give her a good funeral,' said Noah. 'We came all this way. We have to do it right.'

Rallie and Harper nodded.

Rallie’s job was to find flowers. She did not want to take them from other graves, so she picked some toad lily, goldenrod, and turtlehead that

grew in the woods at the edge of the cemetery. She braided all the stems together to make a garland for the Princess and then made another little bouquet to leave behind once they were done.

And so, they decided that Noah would dig the grave, which he did mostly with his hands, but also with the assistance of several sticks and a long, flat piece of slate that was sharp enough on one end to cut through roots. It took some time, but he was

able to hollow out a space big enough for the dollie to rest comfortably.

Harper’s job was to prepare the dollie for burial. She rubbed the dirt off the porcelain with spit and the cleanest edge of her T-shirt. Then she took off her hoodie and wrapped Skylar in it like it was a shroud.

Harper placed the dollie in the hole in the ground and smoothed the hairs around her face. One of the dolly's eyes was open, staring up at

them, but the other was closed. Harper cleared her throat.

Finally, they were ready.

'Skylar,' Noah said. The words came easily, the way they did when he was playing, but he felt entirely like himself. 'You must be one determined ghost to get us to come all this way. I know we did not always do the best job, so thanks for not quitting on us. I’m glad you chose us to be your champions.'

'Skylar,' she said, 'we think that you were about our age when you died and that no one knows your true story, only that something terrible happened. We are going to keep trying to discover the truth for you. We hope you can rest easy now. You're home with your family.'

'Skylar,' Rallie said softly, stepping forward. 'I only ever knew you as our Princess, so that's how I am going to talk to you. We, your loyal subjects, quested far to bring you to this place and have gathered here this

day to bid you farewell on your journey. I’m glad you’re finally free from your tower.'

She leaned down to place the garland around the dolly's neck. Pink petals fell on the Princess’s dress and hair.

'The Princess is dead,' she said. 'Long live the Princess.'

They clasped hands, and then Harper knelt to begin covering Skylar with dirt. The first handfuls covered her face, leaving her fingers, her cheeks,

and her forehead bare. More earth fell until she was covered completely.

'Good-bye, Skylar,' Harper whispered as Rallie set the bouquet she had made on top of the soft, new-turned earth. A few petals fell, dusting it gold.

Noah felt the wind rise, like the wind he had heard singing through the trees the night he had run home from basketball practice. He felt the same chill at his neck, and he shivered, but this time he did not run. He let it pass

over him, racing on and upward. And he thought he heard, very distantly, the sound of a girl laughing.

Smiling, Noah looked out at the lines of graves as they turned to walk back to the road.

Rallie kept pace with him. 'I keep thinking about what Harper said, about us all changing. We are, aren’t we?'

Harper shivered in her T-shirt. 'You guys are.'

Noah wrapped an arm around her shoulders. 'You’re cold because you gave your jacket to a ghost, and you don’t think anything’s different about you?'

Harper snorted, but she did not pull away. 'That’s not what she means. I am simply different like weird. We had this adventure together, but now we are going to go back. And I will be the same, but you guys will keep changing.'

'Quests are supposed to change us,' Noah said.

'How about real life?' asked Harper.

Rallie picked up a blade of grass and folded it in her fingers. 'What’s that? Seriously. This was real. This was a story that we lived in. Maybe we can live other stories too.'

In the distance, Noah saw two cars pull into the graveyard. He recognized Rallie’s aunt’s blue Toyota, with his mom’s beat-up green Nissan behind it. As they drew closer, he saw

the shadow of his father in the passenger seat.

'This was our last game,' Harper said. 'This is the end of our last game.'

'Oh, I don’t know,' said Noah. 'With the Princess gone, the kingdoms are going to be in turmoil. Lots of people want her throne, all of them willing to manipulate, scheme, and battle to get it. And with Tommesings and so many other hero's dead, it is going to be a different world. A world in

chaos. We can’t play it the way we used to, but we could still tell each other what happens next.'

'Chaos, huh?' Asked Rallie, a slow grin spreading across her face. 'Sounds like fun.' she asked.

Harper smiled a familiar scheming smile, her eyes alight with new hope. 'You want to play?'

A memoir from the trunk years later…

'It all ended by me become the Dollie, looked like she was inside it I found a new body, to linger inside…'